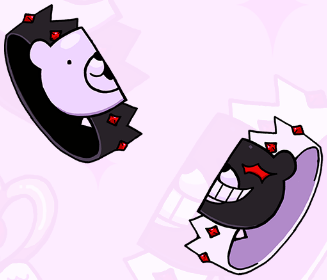
Rare Delights

A Danganronpa Rare Pair Zine



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A Danganronpa Rare Pair Zine

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Rare Delights is a digital charity-zine focusing on rare pairs within the Danganronpa fandom!

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Panther and The Tiger

By: Ecchi_Skecchi

She was strong like a dragon, graceful like a panther. Some crusty old poet had said that once; at least, that's what Natsumi thought. Either way, growing up in the hierarchical Kuzuryu clan had meant that women should be lovely, cultured, porcelain dolls. Maybe Natsumi would have gone along and fit into her slot, if she hadn't met her.

She'd probably been 6 when it happened. She'd known Peko a bit, but really not that well; she was her brother's protector, after all. Her father had already gotten her started with tea ceremony lessons, and she was walking to the room to attend them when she passed by the training dojo. A flash of silver and the sound of wood smacking skin made her stop and peek through the entrance way. She saw Peko, only a year older than her, standing in the middle of the tatami mats. Around her were several men, charging at her with kendo swords. She'd already defeated several others, who were lying on the mat, groaning in pain. Natsumi watched in wonder as Peko lept from side to side on the balls of her feet, always dancing away from the blows before striking back hard and fast. In quick fashion, she dispatched all 9 assailants, to the approval of the dojo's sensei. It was at that moment that Natsumi realized that she wanted to be like that: a strong woman who could be equally graceful and tough. She wanted to be more like Peko and less like the other women in her family.

It wouldn't be for another few years that she realized that it wasn't just that she wanted to be like Peko. Peko was exactly what she aspired to be. Natsumi had worked hard to get tougher, skipping her so-called "elegance classes" to follow the members of her family who would go out on business. She sat in on interrogations, watched shakedowns, and tagged along to any and every aspect of the family business. People would warn her that she would get in trouble, but she knew that she would always be her dad's little girl and she could shake off some of those expectations.

She'd even try to find places where she could pick fights with other kids, in places where the people hadn't heard of her family name and wouldn't be scared to try to fight her. Early on, when she wasn't strong enough, she'd lose and have to beg her father not to take any revenge. Eventually, she got stronger and more skilled, enough to win the fights and come home with barely a scrape.

One night, when she finally felt ready, she approached Peko and challenged her. She could still remember the way the moonlight struck Peko's silver hair, and how her vermillion eyes shone with determination.

"Okay, young mistress. If a fight is what you desire, then I will oblige."

"I'm definitely as strong as you!"

Peko had given a polite nod, before they went to the dojo together. It was over before Natsumi knew it, Peko returning to a sitting position next to her as Natsumi caught her breath.

"You have strength, young mistress, but you need technique. You cannot just learn from these yakuza how to fight." She helped Natsumi to her feet. She grabbed her wrists. "Follow my lead." She began to slowly move Natsumi's arms, advising and helping her. That moment of closeness, of the two practicing in the dead of night with the moonlight pouring through the windows, set something off in Natsumi; Peko was everything she wanted in a partner.

The next few years were a whirlwind. Middle school was much tougher than elementary school. Natsumi decided to pick up photography and constantly clashed with two of her clubmates, Mahiru and Sato. Her father had been giving her and Fuyuhiko more work in family matters, too. Although her brother often received the more interesting assignments, the work she did kept her closer to home. She saw Peko less and less as she would work closely with Fuyuhiko and would need to be at his side more. Their training sessions got less and less frequent, and when Peko and Fuyuhiko graduated middle school, they went on to separate high schools and left Natsumi at the middle school by herself. Natsumi often found herself staring off, imagining a world where Peko and her could be together all the time.

She eventually heard rumors that Peko was being scouted for Hope's Peak Academy. She wasn't surprised: Peko was more than well-qualified to be a student there. Natsumi believed that she was the most deserving person she knew. When Peko and her brother's letters came in the mail, they had a big meal to celebrate as a family. In that air of revelry, Natsumi resolved that she would get to Hope's Peak. She would prove herself worthy, both as a Kuzuryu and as a potential girlfriend. She wouldn't be left behind again.

When she finally got to the Reserve Course, she didn't think she would make any friends. She had a single track mind, and it was full speed ahead to the Main Course.

However, she didn't count on meeting Hajime. He was persistent, trying to help her as much as he could. Finally she broke down to him one day. She admitted the reason she was striving to get to the Main Course was to make sure she was worthy to her older brother and to the love of her life. Hajime had been surprised, but he had told her what she needed to do. He told her to write out a letter of her feelings and, instead of going to the music room to hang out, she should go up to the roof and confess her feelings to Peko.

"Why the roof?" Natsumi had asked.

"The school roof is always romantic. You're up there and it's just you two, the gentle wind, and one of the most scenic views." Hajime scratched the back of his head. "Well, that's what happens on TV, at least."

Natsumi thought his advice was ridiculous, but she still took it. She invited Peko up to the roof at 6:30. The sun would set while they were up there and it would be romantic. Natsumi got there a few minutes early, but those few minutes waiting were agonizingly long. She paced the roof, wondering what could have held her up. The clock kept ticking. Peko was ten minutes late. Maybe the elevator had broken down or something. That's what Natsumi hoped.

Finally, she heard the door to the roof open, and Peko walked onto the roof. "Yes, young mistress? You called for me?"

Natsumi turned and her heart soared. The sun had gotten low in the sky. Those photography books weren't wrong; everything was more beautiful in the golden hour, even somebody who was already gorgeous. Natsumi swallowed her nervousness and approached her, the envelope held behind her back.

"Please, call me Natsumi."

"Young mistress, that's quite unprofessional." Peko looked at her strangely. "Is something the matter?"

"Well, my name is Natsumi. I'd really like you to call me that instead." She was now close enough to hand her the envelope.

"Alright, youn- I'm sorry, Natsumi. What is this about?"

"Peko-" Natsumi's heart was pounding out of her chest. She pulled the pink envelope out from behind her back and bowed, holding out the letter. "Please accept this confession of my feelings!"

"Natsumi?" Peko sounded shocked, but Natsumi could only look at her feet. She felt Peko take the letter tentatively and heard the scratching of the paper as it was opened. She waited for Peko to say something, anything, but after a few minutes, she heard a pitter-patter on the paper. She stood to her full height and peered around the side of the letter. Peko looked back at her with watery eyes, her tears dripping onto the page. "Natsumi, I don't know what to say."

"Peko, I-"

Peko dropped the paper and stepped closer. The tears hid it at first, but she could also see happiness shining in her eyes. "So I'm not going to say anything." Peko instead leaned in and kissed Natsumi, shocking her and making her blush.

The kiss was slow and fast at the same time. Natsumi had finally gotten one, and it felt like the kiss could last forever, but of course, it had to end. Peko leaned back, smiling. It was a rare sight, and it thrilled Natsumi that she could make Peko smile like that. "I would love to go out on a date, Natsumi."

They talked it over and decided that Sunday would be the best day for a date. Before she left, Peko gave her one last kiss. Natsumi stayed on the roof long after Peko left, still in awe of the moment and savoring the amazing moment that she'd finally had.

* * *

"Don't worry, Natsumi. Everything is going to be okay." Her best friend, Hajime Hinata, ran a brush through her hair, combing it again as Natsumi triple checked her makeup in the mirror.

"I hope so."

"Look, you've been waiting for this moment for a long time, and maybe Peko has too. I'm sure this is going to go well for you two."

Natsumi glanced up at him. "I appreciate your confidence."

He placed the hairbrush down on the counter in front of her, nudging her out of her seat. She stood, and he put both hands on her shoulders. "I promise it will go well. You're Natsumi Kuzuryu, and you're one of the best people I know. Now get 'em, tiger."

Natsumi snorted, shaking off his hands. "Alright, alright." She put on the gray vest that was slung over the back of the chair and put it on, buttoning it up quickly. She waved goodbye and headed out, crossing campus to get to the main course dorms. She stopped in the middle of the courtyard to check her reflection in the fountain's water one more time before taking a deep breath and proceeding towards the darkening dorm buildings.

Up a flight of stairs and in a whirlwind she found herself at Peko's door. She hesitated, before mustering up the courage to knock. It was answered a few moments later. Natsumi's jaw almost dropped to the floor.

Peko was wearing a beautiful strapless black dress that flowed down to her angles. The top part was almost like a large, satin bow, knotted in the middle and flowing outward. Her silver hair was straightened, cascading down her back to her shoulder blades.

“Peko, you look stunning!”

Peko blushed. “Thank you, Mistress Natsumi.”

Natsumi groaned in mock exasperation. “Call me Natsumi tonight, please.”

Peko reached out and grasped her hand. “Alright, Natsumi. If that’s what you’d like.”

Natsumi felt her heart soar as she clasped Peko’s warm hand. She smiled. “Shall we get going?”

“Lead the way.” The two stepped carefully down the stairs. Natsumi had opted for flats, but Peko had decided to wear heels. Natsumi guided her down every step. They left the building and walked to a waiting car, driven by one of the Kuzuryu family men.

“Where to?” the driver asked as they sat down in the red leather backseat.

“The Hikari Club, please.” Natsumi said.

“Yes, ma’am.” The driver slid the divider closed, leaving the two in the backseat. Natsumi shifted in her seat nervously.

“The Hikari Club, huh?” Peko asked. “I’ve worked security there for Master Fuyuhiko before.”

Natsumi nudged her. “Well don’t worry. You don’t need to be on guard tonight. Tonight it’s just a nice jazz club.”

Peko leaned into her, and Natsumi felt herself getting hot. They stayed this way all the way to the club. The driver opened the door for them and Natsumi stepped out first, grabbing Peko’s hand to allow her to brace herself as she stepped out of the car. She clasped her hand as they crossed the sidewalk, the attendant standing aside and letting them in. Natsumi was a VIP, after all.

Inside, the sound of a swingy jazz piano came from the corner, where a teenage girl played with expert hands. Tables were scattered throughout the room, with low-light lamps and candles illuminating the areas. A hostess smiled at the two of them. “Just you and your guest, Lady Kuzuryu?”

“Yes, just us.”

“Excellent. Follow me, please.” The hostess led them through the area, Natsumi guiding Peko with her hand past the tables with patrons. The hostess led them to a booth close to the hardwood ballroom dance area. “Enjoy your meals, Lady Kuzuryu and Lady Pekoyama.”

Natsumi picked up a menu and looked at Peko. “Any idea what you’d like?”

She glanced over it, a bit taken a back. “I’m not sure. Perhaps the lobster roll?”

“Order what you’d like; I’m paying, after all.”

The two sat in silence for a moment, looking over their options. Eventually the hostess came back. “Do you know what you’d like?”

Natsumi ordered a steak. She looked over at Peko, who still looked uncertain. Natsumi gave her a reassuring smile. “I would like the Lobster Mornay, if that’s ok?” Peko asked meekly.

“That’s an excellent choice, ma’am.” The hostess took the two menus. “Anything special to drink?”

“Water, please.”

“Water for me also,” Natsumi agreed.

“I’ll be right back with those.” The waitress departed again.

Natsumi covered Peko’s hand with hers. “Are you ok?”

“I’m sorry, because I know you don’t want me to be working. I saw approximately 25 people stared at us as we came in and I can’t help but worry about that.”

“Oh them?” Natsumi scowled at the other patrons. “Don’t worry about them. Besides.” She leaned in, looking at Peko with a sly look. “Maybe I wanted them to see us. Maybe I wanted to show them how beautiful you were compared to all of their companions.”

Peko blushed and looked away. “Th-thank you, Natsumi.”

Natsumi leaned back, winking. “So how have things been going in the main course?”

Peko’s blush faded as she began to talk about what she and her classmates had been up to. It took some nudging on Natsumi’s part to get her to open up further, but eventually she was laughing and smiling just like any other girl.

The food eventually arrived and things got a little quieter as the two dug into their food. The hostess even brought over a few glasses of non-alcoholic champagne for the two of them.

“To new beginnings with old companions!” Natsumi raised her glass.

“To my beautiful girlfriend!” Peko clinked her glass lightly against Natsumi’s They both drank, the fizzy, grape-tinged drink burning both their throats. Peko put her glass down as she giggled slightly.

“What?”

“Your face, it looks so underwhelmed.”

Natsumi felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. She crossed her arms. “Yeah, so what if I am underwhelmed?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Peko composed herself. “It’s just kind of funny. You always seemed so refined to me.”

“Refined, huh?” Natsumi thought back to her childhood a bit. “I’m not too sure about that. You were the graceful, beautiful one to me.”

"I'm not too sure about that either."

"Well, why don't we see it in action?" Natsumi stood and offered her hand. "May I have this dance?"

Peko looked surprised at first but quickly played along. "You may." She stood and as they walked onto the dance floor, Natsumi shot a look at the blonde pianist, her green eyes meeting the girl's amethyst ones. The pianist nodded and struck up a slower tune.

Natsumi grasped one of Peko's hands with hers and placed the other on her shoulder. Peko responded by placing her free hand under Natsumi's arm. When Natsumi began to lead, she found that Peko easily moved in time.

"I didn't know that you could ballroom dance this well," Natsumi commented.

"Perhaps I did some practice, just in case I ever needed it." Peko responded quietly. "Same to you."

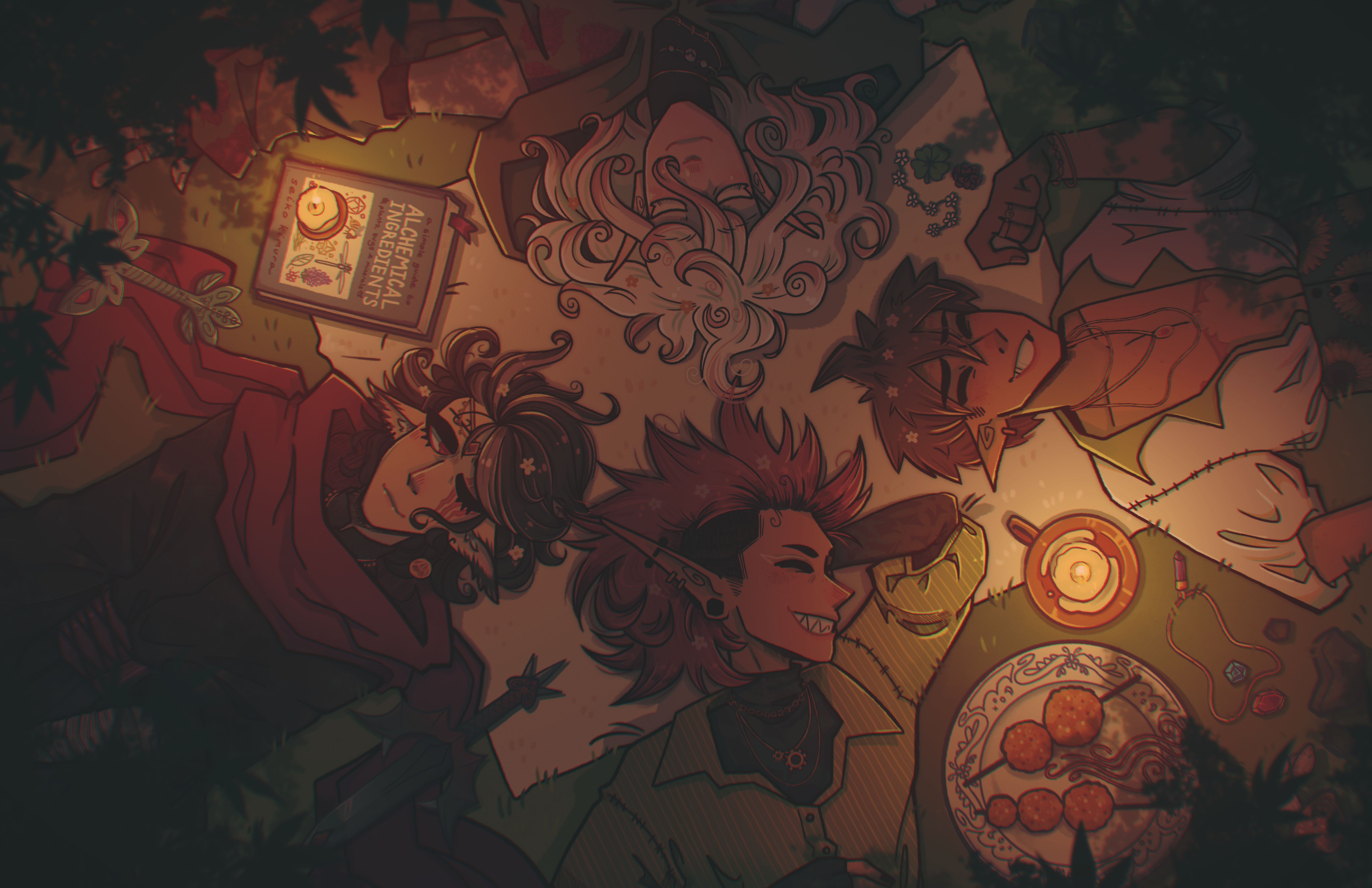
"I may have practiced a few times." That was a lie; Natsumi had been working on her ballroom dancing for the past few days, working with the pianist to choose the best song for this moment.

"This song is beautiful," Peko said as Natsumi began to lead them into a circle.

"Clair de Lune, by Debussy. It means Moonlight in French. It reminds me of that night when we were kids, when I first challenged you to fight. Your hair glowed in that light. It was the night that I realized I never wanted to be without you, Peko."

Peko looked back at her, her eyes sparkling with tears of joy. She leaned in, closing her eyes, and locking lips with Natsumi. The kiss seemed to last an eternity for Natsumi as she slowly spun them. It felt like the culmination of everything Natsumi had ever hoped for, the fireworks bursting in her head. She hoped this feeling would never end.

Top Left: @redactedhaunt
Bottom Right: @DEADMAIDCLUB


a simple guide to
ALCHEMICAL INGREDIENTS
plants, bugs & minerals
seiko kimura

Un, Deux, Trois

By: Rankaloid

As Celestia Ludenberg's heels click against the dull linoleum floor, her steps are practiced and precise. The purpose for this is threefold. One: a Ludenberg is always dignified in all respects, with nary a toe out of place even as they walk. Two: walking this way keeps her chunky gothic heels from making undignified clomping sounds, like the stumbling of an ugly, ill-bred workhorse.

And now, three: in this killing school life, it is best to make few waves and even less noise. Isn't it possible that one of these strangers could be waiting around a corner for someone to pass by, like a wild animal ready to pounce? Why, a young, *fragile* lady like Celeste ought to travel with an escort (if even a single filthy animal here were worthy of such a responsibility). Failing that, perhaps she ought not to travel at all.

But of course, the Ultimate Gambler would be nothing without a spot of risk-taking—and tonight's invitation, delivered by the bright eyes and bubbly voice of Japan's most renowned pop sensation, is a welcome diversion from a dreadful situation.

Celeste stops at Sayaka's door, extends one hand, and presses the doorbell with a soft *bing-bong*. Her nose wrinkles: in disdain at the layer of dust that comes away on her fingertip, for one, but also in thought. What an ugly place this is. The floors are scuffed and worn, the shoeprints of hundreds of students stamped into the cream-colored tile; the lights are dim and pallid, with all sources of natural light boarded up and hidden behind steel plates. It is nothing like the luxury Celestia Ludenberg is accustomed to, and nothing like the luxury that silly girl Taeko Yasuhiro always dreamed of. It is squalor, fit for insects and pigs; small wonder, given the company. Celeste does not belong here.

Someone of Sayaka's status may very well feel the same way. That is why Celeste will have to be careful tonight.

As if on cue, the door opens, and there stands Sayaka, in her plain, proper schoolgirl uniform. Her expression is blank for a moment before she registers Celeste, and then she smiles, head tilted innocently.

"Oh, Celeste!" she greets, with fake surprise, as though she herself did not invite the other girl over. "It's good to see you. Why don't you come in?"

Because you could be planning to kill me, Celeste does not say, but the thought of saying it quirks her lips in private amusement. Instead, she smiles and tilts her head in turn, lifting the layered folds of her skirt and curtseying in greeting.

"Good evening, Sayaka," she responds. "It's a pleasure to see you. I must admit, I was so excited about our meeting tonight that I shared our plans with Sakura over a mid-afternoon snack earlier. I hope this was not meant to be some sort of secret *rendezvous*."

There is a witness, Celeste is implying. *If I die in your room, Sakura will know exactly what happened.*

"A secret rendezvous..." Sayaka echoes, twirling a piece of deep blue hair around her finger. "That sounds sort of romantic, like star crossed lovers." She giggles. "But I already told Makoto I'd be here, so I guess it wasn't much of a secret from the start."

I know, Sayaka is implying back, *and I have a witness, too.* A mutual disarmament.

How fascinating. Perhaps this evening teatime will prove more entertaining than Celeste first thought.

◆

Sayaka's room is so unspeakably plain, Celeste barely even knows how to comment on it. The walls are bare, and the floor and tables are devoid of decorations. For all its cheapness, Celeste's room is at least ornamented with gothic decorations she begrudgingly admits are in *acceptable* taste, for something not chosen by her discerning eye. Sayaka's room feels bare, transient, like the temporary living space of one who does not expect to be somewhere long.

"I know you said you had tea already, but would you care for another cup?" Sayaka gestures to an electric kettle on the nearby table with a smile. Once again, she plays with her hair sheepishly; Celeste's eye is drawn to the motion, to the dark locks curling about her pale, slender fingers. "I got this from a back room in the kitchen… you won't tell anyone, right?"

Celeste eyes Sayaka coolly, then tips her head and smiles, in a perfect mirror of Sayaka's own insincere play at charm. "I suppose you could buy my silence."

"With a cup of tea?" Sayaka suggests, smile widening.

"Tea and company will do, Sayaka. Thank you kindly."

The tea does not take long. Sayaka sets two cups down, one for each. Celeste takes a long sip of her cup, ignoring the harsh burn on her tongue, and watches with an air of superiority as Sayaka delicately blows on the surface of hers.

"How is it?" Sayaka asks.

"Fine," Celeste responds neutrally. It is not to her standards, but really, the best tea is tea made by someone else.

"You're probably used to much better," Sayaka says apologetically. Noting Celeste's confused glare, she giggles. "Sorry. I know you *said* it's fine, but… I'm psychic, you know?"

"... Psychic?" Celeste responds, frowning.

"Anyway, Celeste… why don't you tell me a little about yourself?" Sayaka prods, with the same warm smile she's been wearing since Celeste came in. "You're the Ultimate Gambler, right? But from the way you dress, I'd never guess you were involved in underworld activities… you're like a beautiful porcelain doll."

Despite herself, Celeste puffs up at that, covering up a conceited smile with one hand. "You shouldn't judge books by their titles, Sayaka," she chides lightly. "Did you assume that because I consort with worms, I am content to lie in the dirt with them? No, my dear. I am bred of far higher stock than that."

"You do seem very refined," Sayaka agrees, and Celeste finds herself covering another delighted smirk. Flattery, clearly, but how wonderful it still feels to be acknowledged as who she *truly* is. "Even the way you sip your tea is so proper. What sort of family do you come from?"

What a blatantly probing question! Fortunately, Celeste is more than happy to answer.

"Why, my father is French nobility, and my mother comes from a family of German musicians," Celeste says.

"French nobility?" Sayaka gasps, covering her mouth with her hand. "No wonder your standards for tea are so high… you must have grown up living in luxury."

"I suppose to most commoners, it may seem that way," Celeste says neutrally. "I grew up in a large, baroque castle, attended by many servants. My childhood was composed of many noble sorts of activities, such as croquet, tea parties, and ballroom dances."

"Ballroom dances… what fun," Sayaka exhales. Her expression grows dreamy for a moment, in a way that almost feels nostalgic… and, if Celeste's eye isn't deceiving her, rather sad. "I didn't know you danced, Celeste."

This is where the lie becomes dangerous. Everything you hear is true except that which you personally know—and Sayaka has every reason to be well-versed in dancing.

Celeste will have to think on her feet.

"The truth is, I never really learned how to dance," she admits, in a lamenting, somber tone. "I only learned the most basic of steps… any more exertion would have been terrible for my complexion, after all."

At this, Sayaka's expression slowly lights up. Celeste senses that she has made a capital-M *mistake*.

"Would you like me to teach you?" Sayaka asks.

Celeste opens her mouth to deny that, but the words stick in her throat; Sayaka is leaning over the table. She is faking, of course. They are both faking, both playing at an innocent girls' friendship in this game where they are supposed to be enemies. But her smile seems so genuine. The cloying scent of blueberries hangs around her, a sweet and airy perfume, and Celeste suddenly finds it hard to catch her breath.

Celeste's denial doesn't end up mattering. Sayaka stands up without even waiting for her response, and she holds a hand out invitingly. Celeste examines it with a small frown.

"With what music, Sayaka?" Celeste asks.

"Don't worry about that," Sayaka insists. "Just follow my lead, okay?"

And how can a lady respond to such a gracious invitation but to accept? Celeste smiles, skeptical but proper, and holds her hand out for Sayaka to take. Her hand is soft, but her grip is surprisingly firm, and she pulls Celeste to her feet without even making a noise of exertion.

"So you'll want to stand like this," Sayaka says, after guiding Celeste to the center of the room. She squares her feet with her shoulders and guides Celeste's hand to her waist.

This is ridiculous. How did Celeste end up in this situation? Trapped in an ugly school, standing in an ugly room, about to dance silently with some… *girl* she hardly knows. She really ought to walk out now and save herself some dignity.

"Give me your other hand," Sayaka continues. Her fingers slip between Celeste's, giving her hand a light squeeze. Her face is so close, Celeste can feel her breath ghost past her neck. "I'll lead, alright? It's easy once you get the hang of it."

"Very well," Celeste exhales more than says. A peculiar shiver travels down her back.

Sayaka pauses a beat. Then, she starts to hum. Her voice is as light and airy as Celeste would expect from a sugary-sweet pop sensation, but it's surprisingly strong. The melody is slow, a waltz in 3/4 time, and Celeste finds herself swaying to it even before Sayaka begins to move. *One, two, three. One, two, three.*

It is… really quite a lovely melody, actually. Even without instruments, without a beat, it conjures to mind grand ballrooms and resonant symphonies, swaying noblemen and twirling noblewomen all moving in time together. The chandeliers are high and bright, and their crystal lights twinkle off the gilded walls and stately pillars. Celeste is in attendance, of course, and she is the guest of honor. All of these identical faces of otherworldly beauty, from the servants to the nobles, are here to see *her* and her alone. And laid out for everyone is…

"I haven't danced like this in ages," Sayaka admits, and with the melody unravels the fantasy. Celeste huffs, irritated.

"I thought dancing was your job?" she points out.

Sayaka turns, and Celeste angles her body to follow, swaying in time to a thoughtful silence.

"Well, sure. But a slow dance like this… I've only ever danced like this with my father before," Sayaka admits. She glances away, bashful, bangs shielding her face from Celeste's view. "This sort of thing is a little, umm… intimate for me to do in public."

Girlish shyness, perhaps. More likely, though, it is the social rigors of an idol's life that Sayaka is referring to.

"And yet you would do it in private, with a stranger?" Celeste asks. "Curious… very curious, Sayaka."

"You won't tell, will you?" Sayaka responds, with a teasing lilt.

Before Celeste can properly respond, Sayaka's voice rises once more in a soft hum. The violins pick up again, and the guests in Celeste's mind resume their dancing. Laid out for everyone, on long tables with golden cutlery, is food of all kinds, from every corner of the world. There are *escargot* from France, slices of *jamón ibérico* from Spain, and piles upon piles of expertly-prepared *gyoza* from Utsunomiya. It is a feast fit for a queen, and the Queen of Liars is royalty among royalty.

Of course, between dances and bites of food, the question on everyone's lips is: who will Celestia Ludenberg dance with tonight? Nobles with countries of fortunes to their names, perhaps? Princes of untold dark power?

Celeste's eyes slip open, the barest red slits through which she gazes at her partner. Sayaka's eyes are closed, and the expression on her face is pensive and withdrawn. Mysterious, almost. Her bubblegum blush is far too cheery, and her sweet-smelling chapstick far too shiny, but Celeste wonders… with a paler hue to her cheeks, and a darker scarlet to her lips…

Yes. Of course. Only *one* dancing partner is fit for Celestia Ludenburg. The lights dim to a candlelit glow; the guests quiet and part, like reeds bending to an opening river. Down the ballroom floor strides the only man worthy of the Queen's time. Servants scuttle behind him to hold his cape as it trails like a ballroom gown. His hair is long as an elven prince's and as deep as blue twilight; his features are soft, but his presence is sharp and commanding, and guests shiver as he walks by. His dress is dark and impeccable, with black vests and jackets and slacks and red accents.

The regent prince of vampires strides to where Celeste sits languid on her throne, the only one confident enough to truly believe he *belongs* there. He holds a gloved hand out. His expression is lifted by a mysterious smile, and his dark eyes betray no emotion. The scent of blueberries envelops Celeste as she takes his hand, and…

"Let's try a dip, okay?" the prince exhales softly. His hands, soft as velvet, wrap around Celeste's waist, curl around her fingers, and Celeste gives herself to the motion and leans back. The ends of her curls brush the carpet; blood rushes to her head, and she feels weightless and giddy. When she opens her eyes, the prince is above her, eyes darker than ever with desire.

The music has stopped. All the finery and decadence of the grand ballroom fades. Like Cinderella as the clock strikes midnight, Sayaka's tailored, silver-lined suit fades into the pinks and blues of a drab schoolgirl uniform.

Celeste remains for a moment, weightless, suspended by Sayaka's strong arms on the border between two worlds. Then she exhales, and she clears her throat, and Sayaka helps her to her feet with a small, sheepish giggle.

… What an absurd flight of fancy. It is high time Celeste gets going.

"You should probably get going, huh?" Sayaka says softly. Again with that irritating *intuition*. "Thank you, Celeste. I've always wanted to do that."

Celeste has the presence of mind to curtsey, even as her heart pounds against her ribs. "Of course, Sayaka. This was a… fascinating little diversion."

With that, Celeste turns to leave. But then she feels Sayaka's hand on her wrist, the same hand still buzzing in the tips of Celeste's fingers, and she stops.

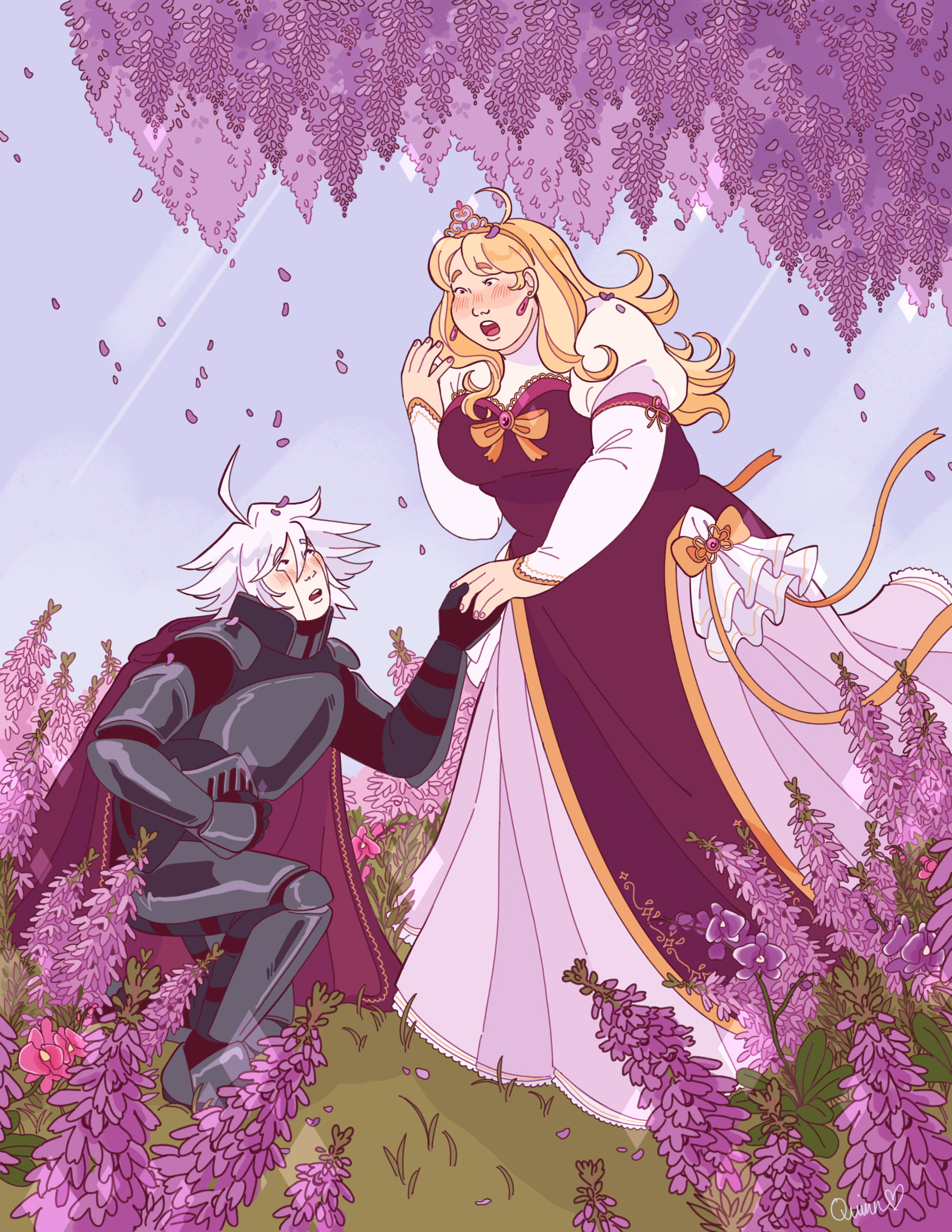
"Celeste?"

"Yes?"

Celeste looks back. Sayaka's expression has shifted. She is unreadable. Emotionless.

"Thank you for pretending with me… for just a little while."

In two days, everyone else's indulgent fantasy of a peaceful school life will end. A body will be found. Tensions will rise. But for just one evening, Celeste hopes, in surely her most absurd fantasy of all, that Sayaka will not have to die for her dream.


Quinn♡

Pearl

By: SuperDuperStarry

It was the only place Nekomaru hadn't searched that he figured she could feasibly reach from the island. He had to admit that it was a smart hiding place for someone who felt so out of their depth. It had been hard for him, too, when Mikan's diagnostics had proven his disease had only debilitated his body further as a Remnant, then even further while it slumbered, his mind plugged into the Neo World Program. *Hard*, when Kazuichi suggested a solution that involved backing his consciousness up in the Program once more and replacing his failing body parts with machinery. He'd understood, though, that it was his single remaining option.

He'd tried it out a couple times before, but there hadn't been much of a purpose, let alone desire, to explore. Nekomaru's mechanical parts were fully waterproof, and so many of his internal organs had been replaced that what remained of his original body—most of his facial features, his left arm, a section of his thigh—could function regularly even underwater.

Bubbles shot out from all around him as he descended, sinking rapidly to the sandy bottom of the ocean. The headlights in his eyes blinked on and brightened his surroundings. Fish winked and skittered across his vision, sunbursts of pale orange and bejeweled yellow. His lights shone over the cool darkness of the ocean subdued by night, tinting the craggy red corals and walls of rock in lilac. The bubbles clung to him where he moved.

Sound was muted underwater. His movement, too, came sluggishly. The waters stirred like a great indigo cape smothered over his body. In the distance, scales and minerals speckled under Nekomaru's headlights. His body produced a faint glow—a bold dark blue, as he'd requested when Kazuichi asked—and it dappled over the second pale aura that grew brighter the more distance he forged from the shoreline.

He had never seen it before, yet somewhere deep within the wells of his soul he recognized the baby pink hue.

Of course she glowed, too. The aureole of light emitted weakly from her body. She was drawn by the cerulean in his eyes to face him as his silhouette approached, and yet, locking her arms around her knees, ducked into herself.

Chiaki was a technological marvel. What remained of her consciousness, stored on the Neo World Program's terabytes of data, had been copy-pasted onto a hard drive and implanted in a machine. Body. Vessel. Kazuichi had ailed for months in scraps of free time to resurrect her, and in her gratitude Chiaki had run as far as she could away from the classmates she had failed. Since her tumble into the ocean, she had planted herself onto the nearest rock and run diagnostics through her memory banks, looping between what she felt certain had happened and where she knew her body disconnected from what her mind had not saved.

She remembered the killing game. She remembered losing it, life by life by life, until her file was promptly deleted. Her head spun when she thought too hard, and she saw in the horizon of her vision the hard pink of the Tetris cube.

Entire swathes of her childhood and school days had been left unfilled in her mind, eroded abysses. Someone had rooted through her life experiences and saved what they had deemed the most important. Her first day at Hope's Peak. Meeting her classmates. Her death. Izuru. Her death.

She sighed, squished her legs together, breathed out bubbles. The ocean was calming. Empty. Quiet. Nothing here was reflective enough for her to make out her differences. On the one hand, it was pretty cool to become something like a protagonist in the video game that was her life now, but then again...

She'd startled when the shifting of heavy footfalls approached. Silt kicked up ahead, slowly parting to reveal the deep blue hue of a familiar shape. She hid behind her hands, but she couldn't stop the excited squeak that emerged from her: “Nekomaru!”

Even underwater, her voice processors were clear. Nekomaru stopped and held her gaze when she spoke. A slow, easy smile spread across his lips, and he waved. Chiaki's lights blinked bright pink. Nekomaru's cerulean lights darkened, blushing purple.

“What happened to you?” she asked, voice hushed.

Nekomaru shrugged. He didn't seem all that bothered. “My sickness spread while we were in the Program.”

Chiaki pouted. All those preparations, and she couldn't even protect *him*.

“But Kazuichi and Mikan fixed me up,” he continued, “so now I'm more powerful than ever.” He jumped slightly. Plumes of sand flew up and twirled around him. Chiaki bit her lip, fought a grin. “You, too,” he said, quieter, indicating her.

He reached out his arm, held it to her. He thought she hesitated, tensed a little, but then her hands unhooked from her face, and she let him pull her to her feet.

Her limbs—baby pink machinery, shined by a steady hand—poked out from around a too-large tee shirt. Although wholly unnecessary, Chiaki clung to it, bunching up the little starfish guy across its front. The shirt was heavy, totally soaked. So was her hair, though the pale strands swayed underwater. With his free hand, Nekomaru tucked a lock behind her ear, watched the synthetic curl spring back.

Chiaki filled her cybernetic cheeks with air, wriggled in her shirt. “I feel weird,” she mumbled.

Nekomaru tried at another smile. Her eyes followed it, though her lips did not. He patted her arm. “Me too. All the time.”

She stumbled a step away from him, her bare feet bursting through sand. Her heels played with ribbons of kelp. Small purple fish followed in her wake, fins rippling like ethereal petals.

He waited for a moment, gave her a head start. Then—the grin creeping up his lip—he gave chase.

The motors and gears that made up his body strained, then propelled him, granting him the momentum to run after her. For so long he had grown accustomed to a system: His lungs would hitch a warning, then his breaths would labor, gait worsen, and heart speed to a dangerous halt just before he crashed. Back to the hospital. The other kids hadn't liked playing with him because he could hardly keep up, was sickly often, and barely remembered their names. His days had been long, lonely stretches, his only reprieve a palm-sized gaming system some pitying nurse or teacher had gifted him.

Now, he ran. The ocean floor was bottomless, endless, stretching far and wide as the sky beyond it. His bare feet hissed against the sandy floor, seaweed and coral whishing by as his metal heart bipped in steady tandem to the machine that granted him this opportunity.

He ran, and Chiaki squealed, turning once to catch him encroaching upon her, then rapidly zipping away, sprinting down the silt path. Her shirt billowed. Bubbles swarmed and shrouded them in an arc, flanked by curious fish and pinching crabs. A stingray passed overhead, momentarily blotting out the piercing starlight that guided them through the underwater passage. Chiaki ducked down a coral-rimmed tunnel, and—chuckling—Nekomaru slowed enough to let her regain her lead. Then he started again, his headlights bouncing across the far wall to let her know she no longer was alone.

She made it through the tunnel before she collapsed on a bed of kelp, limbs splayed like a starfish. She breathed in sharply, accelerating her processors, but she wondered as she stared up through the deep just how much of her gasps of breath were necessary and how much reinforced by the part of her brain that was once human. Fins tickled her cheek, and bubblegum-pink anemones parted for little trails of clownfish that trekked just over her head. Chiaki stared, wide-eyed, as her body hushed and the fish explored her. She swallowed her laughter; their tiny nips and nudges tickled.

Then Nekomaru came crashing out of the cave and toppled right on top of her. They rolled, a sprawl of purple lights and whirring machinery, then landed, entangled.

“Oops,” Nekomaru said, but his voice was swallowed up by Chiaki's. She threw her head back and laughed, and *laughed*, blasting massive bubbles overhead. As she wheezed, body shaking, Nekomaru managed to locate his arm and gently ran a hand through her hair. Chiaki drew silent and sought after his gaze, watching him stroke her cheek.

He was smiling, always smiling. She couldn't understand how. She hoped that maybe she would one day.

Even during the killing game, his spirit had been so bright. Her AI wasn't so good—couldn't even stop the death she *knew* was coming, thanks to Nagito, from happening—and after the first trial she had moped around her room, sleeping and gaming. She'd started missing meals at the resort, and it had been a resilient, smiling Nekomaru who knocked on her door and insisted she come out. To her silence, he kept knocking. Wouldn't take anything for an answer other than the final dejected click of the front door unlocking, and a depressed little Chiaki, swaddled in her Starfy pajamas, coming to morosely greet him.

How he had smiled still. “C'mon. They're all waiting for you. We promised not to start eating until we were all together.” They had *not* in fact waited for her, but between bites of cereal (he mixed a handful of each brand altogether in a bowl of oat milk like a maniac) Nekomaru told her about the goings-on of the group and the islands' relative quietude. He had a strong voice that claimed a powerful cadence. She'd envied it, then. If only her presence was so captivating as to command everyone else to stop hurting one another.

He'd dragged her out to the beach, “Just for a walk,” he'd said. “Even walks are good, as long as you get some exercise.” She'd humored him, and they'd grown lost on the shoreline, kicking stones and pretending the sunshine wasn't improving her mood. She didn't tell him she felt better by the end of it, but she caught him smiling again, lips pulled gently askew, while she dragged him over to spend the afternoon sorting through her game collection with her.

He'd actually recognized a few of the titles. When she asked how, he'd just laughed. But he let her steal him for quiet afternoons, some multiplayer on the DS, some party games and—their favorite—the goofy starfish platformer. He insisted on playing as the little pink one. They spent hours splayed out on the floor dressing up their goofy starfish in hula skirts and sunglasses, collecting treasure and fighting ninja cats. She'd watched the notch between his shoulders ease, heard the gentler edge of his genuine laughter.

And it was impossible not to love him. And losing him had been so sudden—so horrible—unthinkable. And then he was back, and he was machine, but it was okay. It was almost comforting for someone like her, someone who was already less than human, just some scooped-out memories of a girl's lost consciousness.

And then she'd told Hajime everything after Nekomaru died again, because he had shown her how to care about them again, how she could still protect them. Even though she had failed. Even though she had lost him and it had hurt like nothing else had hurt before, not even her first death.

It struck her, then, that they had each died twice and come back stronger from it.

Stronger.

She held out her hand, watched it sway amid the slow-moving kelp. When she found her footing, Nekomaru stood with her, and she managed a shy smile up at him.

They wandered through the kelp forest, flowing patches of leafy green and dark maroon fronds. The stars twinkled overhead, and their automated lights shone on the plants together, illuminating the enchanting undersea grove. Mantas passed around them, causing the kelp to veer this way and that. Little fishes skipped in and out of the stems like bright stones.

She reached for Nekomaru's hand. His filled and overflowed her palm, his fingers folding around hers. She tugged his hand closer, pecked a kiss across the back of it.

He stopped, his lights blinking a frantic scarlet. Chiaki giggled and tugged him again. Huffing a breath, Nekomaru stooped and let her approach him, her hands settling into and ruffling his hair.

Chiaki kissed him lightly, as if afraid of breaking him. Her breaths—sharp, soft—cut through his lips. Underwater, her mouth moved differently, yet still it bled the same sweet heat into him. Her arms were around him, and touches like tiny starbursts kept surprising him all along his cold metal body. She radiated such fervor, and she fit so nicely in his arms, and he could feel her laughter through her mouth, and somehow they were together again. The shock of it slid down his throat and settled in his heart, a shining, silvery seed.

They resurfaced when the glint of pale-green predawn began to sweep through the ocean floor. The waters lapped around them, crashing down where their feet found dry sand and moved methodically to shore. Together they sat, hands overlapped, just close enough that the tide could roll in and tease along their heels, and they watched the sun overcome the stars, green bleeding into golden light.

Nekomaru took in the rolling waves, then tensed. “Oh. I think we surfaced on Hajime and Fuyuhiko's beach.”

Chiaki blinked. “How can they own an entire beach?”

“I don't know,” he said, “and I really don't want to know.”

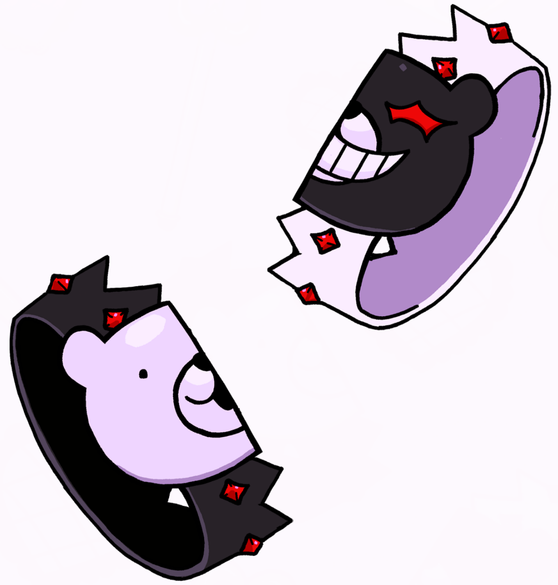
Her head fell into her hands. Her shoulders quivered with laughter. “That makes no sense!”

“It's what the first survivors keep saying,” he muttered. He kept looking back like maybe they should move somewhere else.

“Well.” Chiaki tapped her foot against his. “They aren't awake to bother us, are they?”

A tender smile spread across Nekomaru's face. He took her in, brows poised.

And they waited. Together, they waited for morning, when their tired out battery-less friends would rise with the sun.



2022

Ultimate Spa Day!

By: Mez0_Vision

"Okay, *now* you can open your eyes!" The surprise Kirigiri had been waiting for since being woken up at 4 AM finally revealed itself as Hina removed her hands from in front of her eyes. In front of her was a set of revolving doors, a sign above them reading *Spa Meraki.*

Her eyes widened, then looked at Hina's grinning face. "A spa!?"

"Yup!" At their feet were the rolling suitcases Hina had shoved into the car as they piled into it early that morning. Looking at her girlfriend's face, the nervously averting eyes and the teeth resting on her bottom lip, it was clear she was flustered. "I know you've been working hard lately because of your new detective agency, so I wanted to give us a little getaway."

"Oh." Kyoko let a smile tickle the corners of her lips as she was pulled inside, past the spinning doors and up to the front desk. Luxurious cushions in soft pastels greeted them from tempting couches and chairs as her eyes wandered over the reception area. There was even a waterfall on the wall closest to her, and little droplets flung forward toward her arm.

"Checking in for Asahina." Aoi said, taking Kyoko's hand from where it had been tugging her gloves tighter on her fingers. Her nails strained at the stitching as the fabric was pulled taut. The receptionist clicked on her keyboard. Hina added, "For the two night getaway?"

"Ah, yes, I see that. Have you considered upgrading to become a full time member?" She recited the question while reaching underneath the desk, pulling out two simple tote bags, the sides bulging from the goodies inside. "Perks include walk-in overnight stays in a special suite, treatments, up to 50% off of future packages, and being entered into a raffle to win a mystery vacation each year. All that for only a sixteen thousand yen membership fee each month."

Excitement flitted across Hina's face as she turned to consult Kirigiri, who shrugged hopelessly. "We'll think about it!" she replied, letting go of her hand in order to grab the bags hanging from the receptionist's palm.

"Alright, well the key to your room is in the bag, as well as your schedules and complimentary goodies! Let me show you the way to the suite." Briskly, the woman began to walk across the building, the couple lagging behind as they dragged their suitcases and bags along. It didn't help that they both got distracted by the alluring rooms they passed by. A massive pool, a room outfitted with a multitude of massage chairs, a yoga studio. Flowers and plants reached out to them from where they grew along the walls

They were brought to the fifth floor, where massive arched doors led to their suite. Kyoko reached for the door handle, her hand incidentally clasping over Hina's, who was about to do the same thing. Laughing, they swung the door open, revealing the interior of their room, which was filled with light from the giant windows on the opposite wall. Hurrying in, they discarded their stuff to marvel at everything.

"The bed is so soft!" Hina giggled as she practically jumped onto the queen size mattress that was covered in an abundance of comforters and pillows. Kirigiri opened the mini fridge that held small cans of soda inside. Taking one, she fumbled to break it open, her glove slipping on the metal tab. When she finally opened it, she held it to her lips and slowly drank the sweet chemical concoction as Hina continued, "Okay, so we have about thirty minutes to unpack and get settled, then we have to head down to get a massage. Then a manicure…and we have some time to go to one of the private pools. You know I had to make sure we got that on our trip, so I packed all the bathing suits I could find. And then dinner at one of their bougie restaurants." She paused, and Kyoko was still drinking from the can, reaching the dregs of it. The enthusiasm began to slip from her face at the lack of response. "Does that sound good?"

She swallowed. Sheepishly, she put the empty can down, "It sounds great."

After both of them had been massaged, tense muscles now loosened and relaxed, they made their way to the spa. Kyoko tied the thick knot around her robe tighter, crossed her arms and tapped her finger to her bicep.

Spilling over with excitement, Hina beamed, "I'm thinking of getting them painted a light blue with a cloud design! Do you think they do that here? I was also considering acrylics, but it feels weird when my nails are super long and I try to swim, you know? What are you thinking of getting?" And then those blue eyes were trained on her, both of them stopping in the hallway.

Raising a hand to her cheek, she felt it puff out due to her smile. Aoi loved getting her nails done, even if they had to be cut short so they wouldn't become flimsy after a good swim. "I haven't thought about it yet." She was a good liar, but Hina's brow ticked upwards. In all honesty, Kirigiri had been thinking about it ever since they had walked into the spa. Out of the corner of her eye, she could make out the hazy purple of the fabric covering her hands, a patchwork of scars and marred flesh.

Gently, Asahina's hands reached out for hers and she squeezed. "Oh Kyoko, you don't have to get one here if you want. I'm so sorry!"

"No, don't worry about it, it's fine. I can just watch as you get yours done."

Shaking her head firmly, Hina raised their intertwined hands between them, slipping one of the gloves off and pressing her lips against the thick scars and indentations. Kyoko's face flamed with her blush, and as she swallowed thickly, she felt the skin of her neck turn molten. "I can just give you a private one back at our room." Hina's eyebrows turned upwards. "Oh, don't look at me like that! You're adorable!" And after one more kiss, she slipped the glove back over her hand.

Once Hina had bought every item the lady who gave her the manicure suggested, they hurried to their room so she could spread out their haul. They sat in front of each other, and Hina pulled Kyoko's hand toward her. She flushed, soft fingertips grasping the bare skin of her palms and thin fingers. She was careful and meticulous, avoiding getting any paint on her skin, and soon enough she had finished applying the pitch black polish named *Shh! It's Top Secret.* She screwed the top back on the bottle, clicked the button on the nail lamp, and Kyoko admired the manicure, missing the feeling of their hands touching. The gloves that had been thrown across the room and promptly forgotten were reluctantly brought back to her, along with her bathing suit.

Hina winked playfully. "Are you ready, gorgeous?"

"The best way to start a swim is with a dive!" Aoi said, even though she had told her this many times before. She balanced on the edge of the diving board, while her girlfriend lingered at the back. With her arms raised above her head, she prepared to leap down. Today she had chosen a yellow one piece, which complimented the darker tone of her skin. Watching her, Kirigiri was glad it was a private pool so no one else would be able to see how flustered the toned muscles and curves of her flame made her. But then she was off the board, leaving it swaying up and down. A crash into the pool. Then her head was bobbing above the water, her hair slick to her skull and flowering out from her in swirls like tentacles.

Glistening, she smiled and said, "Don't be shy! Join me."

Feeling unsteady as the board bowed towards the rippling water, she stepped

forward. "Is it cold?"

"No."

A pause.

"Are you stalling?" Hina started to giggle, covering her mouth with her hand.

"What! I am not!" she said, taking another step, crossing her arms.

"You are. Just jump! Don't leave me all alone in the pool."

Scoffing, she looked to the other end of the pool. "You're going to leave me all by myself in a minute when you swim all the way to the other side."

"Not while I'm here to swim with you! At least you make good eye candy while you're up there, dove."

With that, Kirigiri jumped off the diving board so Hina wouldn't see her face turn bright pink.

Dinner was at a small table covered in a white cloth, candles burning in the center with two wine glasses. Their early arrival gave them time to eat appetizers and relax before couples began to flood in and fill the room with the noise of clinking silverware and flirtatious conversation. As Kyoko cut into her salmon, Hina's eyes wandered past her. Curious, she started to turn her head, but she was quickly told not to.

"What is it?" she asked, her fork hovering in mid-air.

"Shhh!" Hina pressed a finger to her lips, then lowered her voice to a whisper, even though no one would probably be able to hear them over the noise of people eating dinner. "Behind you…looks like someone had the same idea as me…"

Whispering back, as if they were two spies on a mission, she said, "Who!?"

"Leon," she nodded her head in the direction she had been eyeing, and Kirigiri turned, seeing their friend sitting across from Byakuya. "Isn't that adorable!?"

Snickering, she turned back towards Aoi. "Do you think they'll notice us?"

"Oh definitely not! What a crazy coincidence! I feel like we would have heard about this from Kuwata before now…he loves to blab."

"He does…unless Togami planned this for them? He has the cash."

"You truly are the Ultimate Detective, Kyoko." Hina nodded, returning to her food as Kirigiri rolled her eyes.

With full stomachs, Kyoko and Aoi laid down on the bed, their hands nearly touching. Noticing this, Kirigiri linked their pinkies. "Do you hear that music?" she murmured. Golden notes of smooth jazz wandered in from the room next to them. She closed her eyes, listening acutely to the brass.

“Are you that tired already?”

The question made one of Kirigiri’s eyes peek open to look at her. Her partner had shifted onto her side to look at her. Her round chin was tucked into the pale palm of her hand. Hair fell from where it had been kept neatly behind her ear. “No, I’m just listening.”

“With your eyes closed, dove?” A light, twinkling laugh danced off her lips, even sweeter than the music. The hold on her pinkie tightened, squeezing at the joint. “It’s alright if you’re tired. I brought us here to relax, but our busy schedule made it kinda hectic, huh?”

“I’m not tired.” Kirigiri said, fighting off the yawn that had jumped from Hina to her.

The song from the other room stopped, leaving them in silence. Hina frowned. “Did you have fun today? I know this isn’t really your style…”

Sitting up, a smile broke across her face. Their hands tangled together. “I loved being with you today, Asahina. Thank you.” Leaning in, they kissed, the jazz music resuming to the thrum of their hearts. “I think I’ve decided about that membership.” Brows furrowed, Aoi’s eyes fluttered open. “Membership?”

“From this morning.” She reached up to Hina’s face, twirling her finger around her hair, then slipped off the hair tie that held it up into her usual ponytail. The brown tresses fell, framing her face and shining in the last lights of sunset. “We should subscribe.”

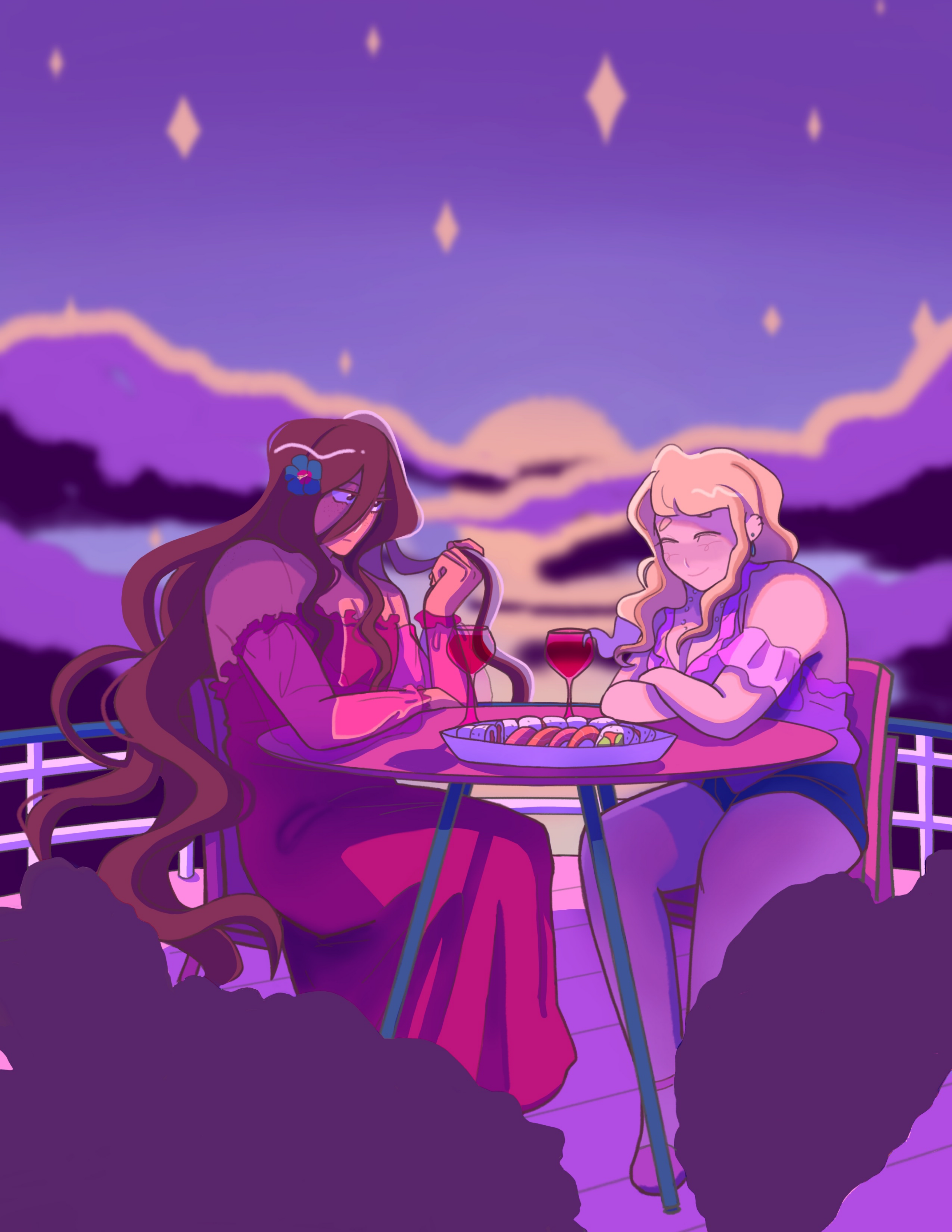
Quick as the strike of a match, her flame’s face lit up. “Really!? Kyoko!” Her muscled arms swiftly enveloped her into a brief embrace before she laughed and laid her head back on the pillow. Her voice drifted away as she spoke next, becoming soft and sleepy. “I’m so glad that you enjoyed it. I love you, dove.”

“And you said I was the tired one.” She rolled her eyes, moving closer to her, pressing against her side.

Aoi’s eyes peeked back open to glare at her, even though she was smiling. “Aren’t you going to say it back?”

“Fine. I love you too.”

Top Left: @redactedhaunt
Bottom Right: @DEADMAIDCLUB



I Sing the Language of Flowers

By: WaferBiscuits

Korekiyo, Gonta thought, looked a lot like a great black wasp.

It was an easy thought to occur to him, with Korekiyo always sitting in front of him in homeroom, their inkblot hair resting over their back like a sleek carapace. They never slouched, rarely spoke, and seemed perfectly content to keep their attention focused on the flaky, mite-eaten tomes they seemed so fond of. Quiet, and yet ever-present, just like a wasp.

Gonta would never say such a thing out loud, of course! He was a proper gentleman and knew from trial and error how people often felt about being compared to insects. It was awful enough during moments in homeroom when someone would break the spell of flipping paper and scratching pens to leap from their chair and shriek at the sight of a tiny spider skittering over the windowpane with its pipe cleaner legs.

Those were the times that Gonta felt most grateful for his size. Perhaps it was unbecoming of him to use his booming voice and hunter's reflexes to leap from his chair and rush to his charges. Then again, a true gentleman couldn't sit by and let a misunderstood friend have their life squashed away!

It was strange. Whenever Gonta cupped an insect in the palm of his hand with students swarming around him and begging him to kill it, he always caught Korekiyo watching him. Never crying out, never frightened, just a steady gaze over a matte black mask. Always watching.

Truthfully, Gonta wanted nothing more than to strike up a conversation with them (as a gentleman does). Perhaps, if Korekiyo would be so inclined, he'd take their bandaged hand and offer it a kiss, so long as he remembered to keep his posture bowed and his other arm crisply tucked at the small of his back.

But Korekiyo never seemed like one for small talk. Any talk, really.

It was a Wednesday in April when Gonta walked into homeroom. Though usually the first one at his desk, he had lingered out on the grounds to watch the cherry blossoms flutter around him in a honeyed rain. Dozens of waxy pink shells stuck to his hair like cicada sheds.

It surprised him to find only Korekiyo in attendance. They sat at their usual desk in front of his own, their posture mantis-like and disciplined as they studied a fossilized book with a flecking gold leaf cover.

Gonta smiled. "Good morning! Did Korekiyo see the cherry blossoms outside?"

Korekiyo glanced up at Gonta for only a second before they settled back to their reading, the tips of their fingers rubbing at the edges of the book's cover. The mesh of their mask contorted as they replied in a quiet mumble. "Mm. Yes, quite lovely."

Over the top of their head, Gonta saw a bundle of color resting on the top of his desk, a curious splash of pink and lilac that made him readjust the smudged frames of his glasses and walk over for a closer look.

There was a bouquet on his desk, an artful arrangement of pretty ruffled peony petals that stood out like a lady's petticoats against rubbery bell jar foxgloves that smelled like maple syrup and nectarines. Someone had tightly wrapped it up with a silky platinum lace that reminded Gonta of a powdery moth's wings.

He took up the bundle with shaking hands, almost too afraid to touch it, and that his bumbling clumsiness would tear it all down. "T-This is…" he breathed. The flower smell was dizzying.

Korekiyo, their head still bowed to their pages, gave a wheezy laugh.

"Foxgloves paired with peonies, a message of bashful admittance from a secret admirer," they said. They readjusted their mask, pulling it higher over their cheekbones. "Well… maybe not so secret in this case, hah."

"Oh, Gonta understands." Gonta smiled. A tingling haze swam over his cheeks as he held the flowers close to his nose and shut his eyes. "Who could have left them, he wonders?" He spoke gently, in a tone that gave off that he knew very well who had.

He heard the smile in Korekiyo's voice. "Who, indeed?" they agreed.

* * *

That was the catalyzing event, the beginning of a series of gestures that marked a chrysalis of a relationship. The bouquet gave way to sporadic tokens, single blooms left for Gonta to discover at his desk, and for Korekiyo to murmur a quiet meaning to add to their declaration.

The first token was a single pansy, sunny yellow with a Rorschach face.

Korekiyo barely glanced up from their book when Gonta picked it up. “To show that someone has been thinking of you,” they said, the smile clear as a chime through their voice.

“But who?” Gonta played along. He couldn’t keep the charmed laugh from bursting out of him. “Who is that someone, hm?”

“It’s hard to say.” A crackling giggle sputtered from their mask, shoulders bobbing in mirth. “You see, I’ve been so focused on my reading that I hardly see who comes and goes.”

Korekiyo’s game was set, a childish one, but Gonta didn’t care. It still felt like a proper courtship, something refined as opposed to an outright confession. It was a savoring of emotions, a way to see his admirer in a new light from afar. He thought of proper gentlemen and ladies swiveling about each other in their dazzling pearl-strewn dresses and crushed velvet suits, elegant chitlin rustling as they preened and swarmed about each other. Wouldn’t they do something like this? A masquerade of declarations?

The second token was another modest single flower, a honeysuckle clipping with slim petals bursting from its fuzzy core like antenna, its scent an echo of vanilla as Gonta held it to his face.

“Devotion,” Korekiyo mumbled. As always, they kept a book open at their desk, but when Gonta was around, they never turned the page. Their head craned downwards, hair spilling and curtaining their face. “Devotion and affection.”

Compared to the last gifts, this was much bolder. Gonta was almost glad that Korekiyo wasn’t looking at him to see his flushed cheeks. He felt warm, only breaking from his reverie when he saw something latched to one of the honeysuckle’s petals, a tiny white sack with a cottony shell.

Gasping softly, Gonta cupped his large hand around the flower’s head and slowly lowered it for Korekiyo to see, knees bending slightly. “Look.”

“Hm?” Korekiyo tucked away a glossy ribbon of hair behind their ear and gave a small start, an exhalation puffing the fabric of their mask as they looked. “Oh, dear! I wouldn’t have cut that one if I had seen that it had a passenger. Sincerest apologies, Gonta.”

“No, Korekiyo did nothing wrong. Bug friend isn’t hurt, see?” Gonta hardly even processed the confession spun in Korekiyo’s words. He kept his hand protectively cradled about the flower as he straightened his posture and looked at the clock. “Gonta has time to take them outside, he thinks.” He took a step then paused, a sting of anxiety icing his chest as he met Korekiyo’s jewel beetle eyes. “Would Korekiyo mind…” he stopped himself, thought for a moment, then grinned. “Does Korekiyo think whoever left the flower would mind if Gonta put it back outside?” There, the game was back on.

Korekiyo’s laugh was a soft chuff, fond and warm with delight. “No, Gonta, I dare say they wouldn’t mind at all.”

Under the dappled shade of the hydrangea shrubs lining the courtyard, Gonta gently tucked away the honeysuckle cutting. His fingertip brushed at the cocoon’s side, palm pressing against mulch shavings as he whispered to it. “There you go, little moth friend.” He suspected several species that it could be, but the soft shell and sizing was a sure giveaway for a moth, rather than the shiny chrysalis of a butterfly.

As he stood, his eyes widened as his nose caught the smell of perfume and he glanced back down. “Oh!”

The hydrangeas dotted the shrubs in a mix of blue and purple popcorn ball puffs. Insects congregated around them, whizzing specks of black mites and fat honeybees. Teeming with life and nurturing health and, Gonta thought, the perfect reciprocation to Korekiyo’s gifts. Maybe it was flashy, but what gentleman worth their salt wouldn’t go all-out? They looked like fireworks paused at their brightest.

How strange. He had always focused so deeply on the bugs surrounding them that he had never considered the flowers themselves outside of being a pollen source.

Gonta smiled to himself as he ambled back down the courtyard to the school doors. He’d come back in the evening for a cutting, the heartiest of the bunch. The purple would be best, he thought, less pastel than the blue, and more complimentary to Korekiyo’s ebony shell.

He wondered, what would a hydrangea mean to Korekiyo? Their little assigned definitions and meanings seemed utterly random, but they were never negative, only positive and kind.

The hydrangea wouldn’t be any different, surely?

Few insects lived long lives.

Flowers were the same, and Gonta didn’t waste any time in gathering his cuttings in a decorative bushel to present the very next day, the white-speckled branches tied up in a stringy hemp rope with three orb-like blooms squashed together. It wasn’t nearly as pretty of a decoration as Korekiyo’s ribbon work, but it was all Gonta could scrounge up from the depths of his dorm room. It was that or a strand of mounting wire, and that was much too impersonal for his liking. A gentleman would never!

It was just a shame that he didn’t have an element of surprise. Korekiyo was always painfully early to every function they went to, and class was no exception.

They were a creature of overbearing punctuality, and it gave them a wondrous and mysterious omniscience that made Gonta's chest somersault.

Wasps, he knew, were often like that, always nesting up in lofts and alcoves where and when you least expected them.

There would be no opportunity to leave the gift on Korekiyo's desk without risking walking in on Korekiyo themself. Gonta wondered, briefly, about the possibility of leaving the flowers outside of their dorm room, but he dismissed the idea as impractical.

So, it couldn't be helped. The game would end with all of its playful anonymity stripped away through Gonta's act of reciprocation, but that wasn't so bad. All good things had to end before they spoiled.

It was a mild day when Gonta found himself in the doorway leading to the sterile familiarity of the homeroom hive, the hydrangea bouquet hidden behind his back as he watched Korekiyo glance up from their book, their eyes twinkling. "Someone is early," they teased.

Gonta felt sweat pearl over his forehead. He tried to ignore it as he readjusted his clammy fingers around the bouquet and walked to Korekiyo's desk. He swore he could hear the petals rustling behind his back. "Gonta has something for Korekiyo."

"Oh?" Korekiyo closed their book and slid it aside, their beady eyes alight with usual clinical curiosity. "What's the occasion, hm?"

They asked this in their usual amicable tone, but Gonta stiffened. He felt like he was being asked to dance a waltz without knowing the steps. With a dry throat and perspiring hands, he pulled the hydrangea bundle from the small of his back and offered it in a gesture that he hoped wasn't as sloppy and shaky as he thought it looked. "F-For Korekiyo," he stuttered.

Korekiyo's eyes widened. The hydrangeas were still fresh, their woody branches knocking together underneath three massive domes of spider-sized purple blooms.

They gingerly took the bouquet and held it closer. To Gonta's utter horror, they almost looked more pensive than happy.

Without bothering to think, he babbled. "G-Gonta just thought Korekiyo should have something, too! Because Korekiyo has been so generous to him." He grabbed a small folded-up cloth in his breast pocket and dabbed his face, risking looking sloppy to keep the sweat from running under his glasses. He couldn't recall the last time he had been so nervous. "… Do they not like them?" His voice wobbled. "If so, Gonta is truly sorry!"

That snapped Korekiyo back to attention. "Oh, no! Gonta, darling, you've done

nothing wrong at all. Don't fret, please." They put a comforting hand on Gonta's wrist, the starched cotton resting like a featherweight on his cuff. "If anything, I apologize. Sincerely. Quite rude of me to get lost in my mind for a moment there." Chuffing softly, they stood from their desk and gave Gonta's wrist a firm squeeze, nodding their head towards the bouquet in their hand. "I just thought it funny."

"Funny?" Gonta asked. He could tell that Korekiyo was smiling in that hidden way of theirs, their mask scrunching up to their nose. "What is funny?"

"Hydrangeas." Korekiyo lifted their hand from Gonta's cuff to run their fingers over the petals. "From a Victorian perspective, a hydrangea can signify one of two things: distrust or heartlessness. No clear idea why, though some have speculated that the flower's low seed count, despite its large size, gives it a bit of an ostentatious air."

They spoke fervently, passionately, eyes ablaze as Gonta stared down at them, dumbfounded and incredibly embarrassed.

"Gonta was not aware any flower could have such a nasty meaning," he said, blanching. "Bug friends are all friends, so he thought Korekiyo's flowers were similar." And how utterly foolish for him to think so.

Korekiyo tittered, unmistakably delighted. "Oh, if only! Sadly, no. Many flowers have had awful meanings ascribed to them. Sunflowers can convey unhappiness with a bad business partner, petunias for resentment, basil for hatred. Goodness, the possibilities are endless with flower language."

They raised the bouquet to their face, eyes fluttering shut. "It's all very silly, flower language. Victorians really only made the whole thing up to sell decorative books for the upper crust to decorate their parlor tables. Quite popular, too, filled up with illustrated plates by budding artists. Alas, many of the surviving books are worthless for resellers as the worth was in the plates, which were often ripped out and sold by themselves. But from an anthropological perspective, the text has its own value as a little cultural learning tool, and…" They trailed off, cleared their throat, and blushed. "My apologies for going on a tangent."

Gonta shook his head. "No, it is interesting!" Korekiyo always spoke with such a soft assertiveness, a calm balm to his nerves. "They're not upset?" he asked.

"Why would I be?" Korekiyo's mask rose in a grin. "A handsome boy brings me a bouquet of stolen flowers, and he asks if I'm upset?" They snickered in a giddy and breathless little way. "May I kiss you?"

Gonta, unable to speak, nodded.

Korekiyo, with a pleased hum, pressed the mesh fabric of their mask to Gonta's cheek. It was a chaste gesture, the purse of their lips barely noticeable under a thick layer of fabric. It didn't matter. A kiss was a kiss, after all, and Gonta was sure he'd faint just from how Korekiyo's nose squished against his face. They smelled like the archives in the school library, that primordial old book smell of woodworms and mothballs.

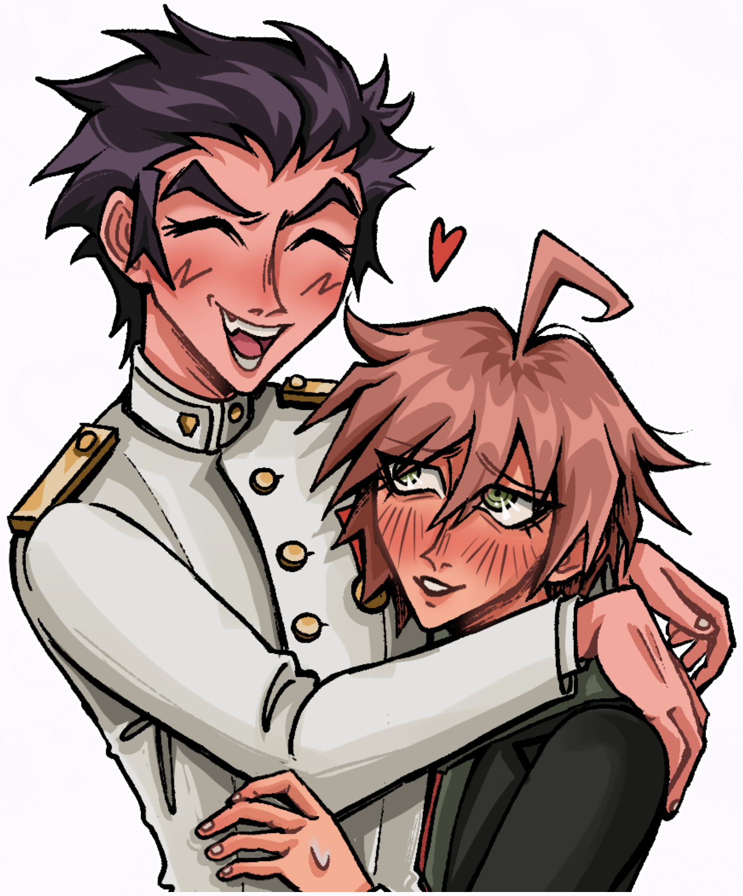
"Thank you," Gonta murmured. He tried to keep his voice as quiet as possible, lest he break apart the undefinable tension between them. It felt fragile, gossamer thin, and apt to tear apart if he navigated through it with his usual oafishness.

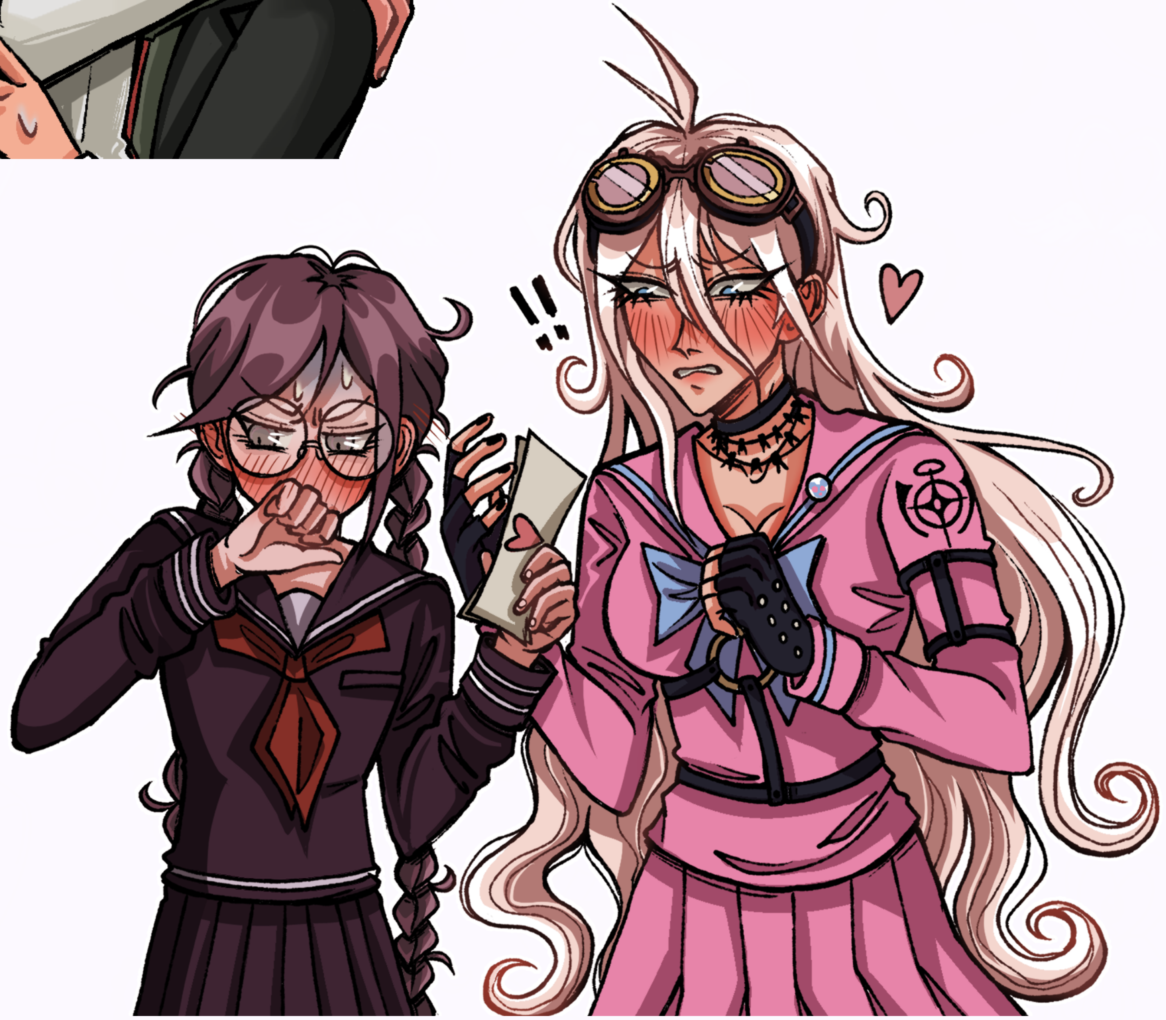
Shakily, he wrapped an arm around Korekiyo's lithe waist, his boxy palm settling at the small of their back. "Korekiyo is welcome," he said, before slowly craning his neck to kiss Korekiyo's forehead.

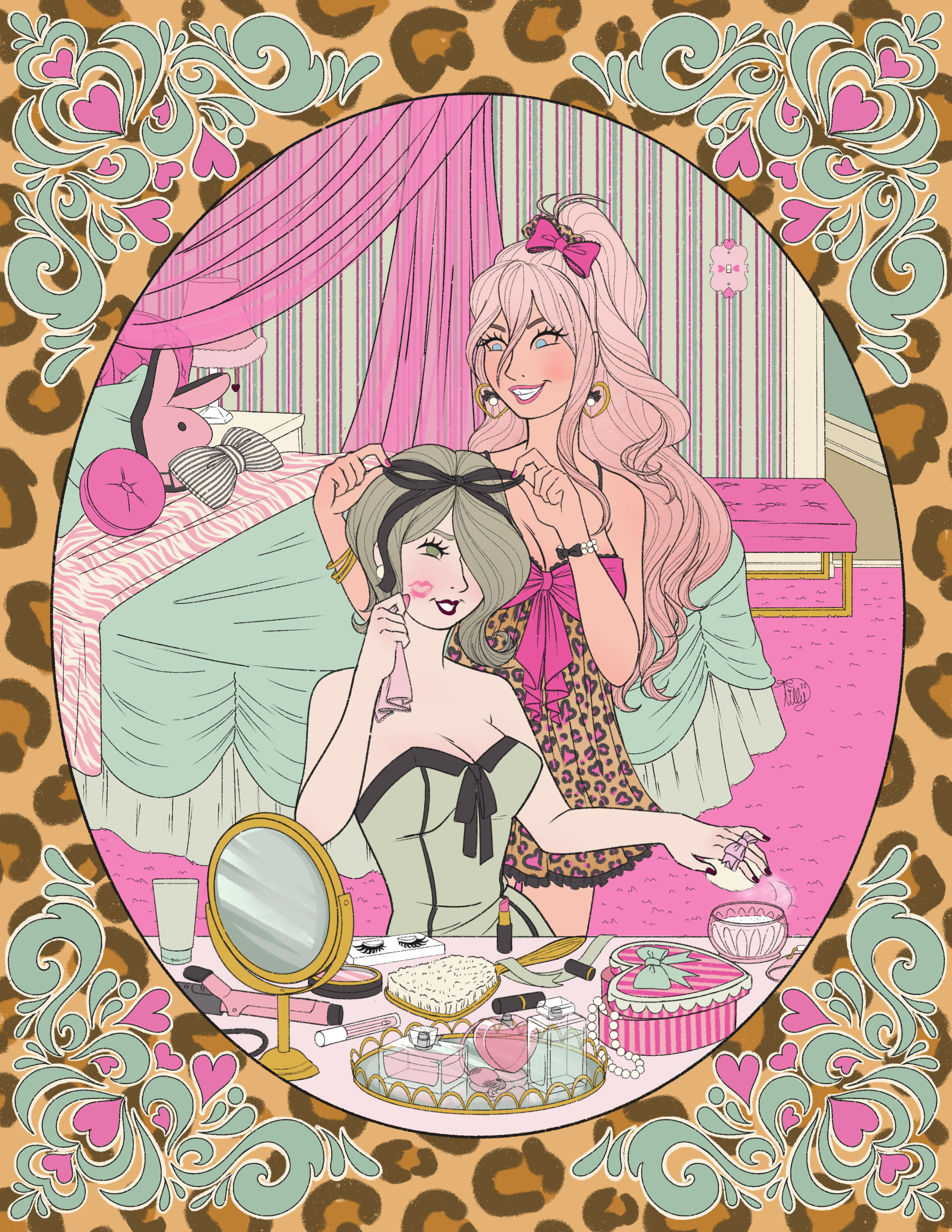
Korekiyo's mask raised up higher on their face, eyes crinkling to what Gonta knew had to be a smile underneath their shell as they deftly kissed him once more, their lips fluttering underneath their mask and their gloved hands weaving around his arm as they whispered.

"You really are quite the gentleman."

Below: @redactedhaunt






Tilly 22

One

By: FidgetyJoltik

Leon didn't wear any of his usual jewelry today, save for a single pair of silver stud earrings. And it wasn't until the middle of the ceremony that Kiyotaka took notice, when they exchanged rings and he could finally steal more than a passing glance at his partner's hands. They were completely bare, not a glint of metal or a speck of nail polish in sight.

Surely Kiyotaka couldn't be blamed for not thinking much of it at the time, not when he had a brand-new husband and a whole wedding to keep from falling apart. So he simply slipped on Leon's wedding band with as much focus and reverence as his trembling frame would spare, and that was that. They were one.

He promptly forgot about it afterwards—forgot almost everything for a moment there, when he and Leon shared their first kiss as a married couple up at the altar. Didn't leave much room to wonder about absent jewelry or worry over the logistics of the rest of the day. And the latter naturally took priority over the former once his brain rebooted.

Which is probably why Kiyotaka's only remembered it now, several hours into their reception, twisting his own band around and around on his finger and making himself dizzy trying to follow its path.

It feels like it's been ages since he last got to truly sit down, but his thoughts haven't slowed just because he's off his aching feet. Matter of fact, they're running on overtime trying to catch up to the whirlwind that today has been. The ring spins faster with them.

All his years of avoiding the vanity, the expense and inconvenience of wearing jewelry, of purposefully keeping his hands free of any constrictive decorations, only to wind up with a permanent one. To Kiyotaka's surprise, though, the ring on his finger doesn't feel unpleasant. It's smooth and warm with body heat and somehow rests heavier than the few grams of metal it's made of—as if it were even physically worth more than its weight in gold. Something Kiyotaka could see himself wearing for the rest of his life, even, and a reminder of his partner who feels exactly the same.

That thought only starts his head spinning all over again.

Why was Leon so light on the jewelry today? It's not like him at all. Kiyotaka snaps to attention at the movement in his periphery, just in time to see a silver-haired waitress approach his table and pour him a glass of coffee. He accepts it gratefully, eager to get the last stubborn bits of champagne off his breath. With any luck it'll help keep his eyes open too.

The reception has steadily wound down with the daytime hours and the color of the sky, and for the first time in months Kiyotaka's mental to-do list is reasonably short. Setup went smoothly, decorations turned out perfect, dinner's been served and cake's been cut, Mondo did a wonderful job with his best-man speech (despite spilling his drink in a less-than-graceful attempt at a toast), and Kiyotaka and Leon got their own little dance in. What a dance that was, too—just the two of them on the floor, stepping to a song they both knew by heart, turning and twirling like a ring spun around a finger. Off in their own little world, dancing like nobody was watching.

A shame it had to end so soon; really, Kiyotaka could say the same about this whole day. Still, there is something nice about being able to cross so much off his list. So much that has already happened, and therefore can no longer potentially go wrong.
Like the ceremony itself, which of course is long over. The knot has been tied, so to speak; all that's left are a few loose ends to tuck away.

Next order of business, then: where on earth did Leon run off to *this* time?

With a sigh Kiyotaka lifts his head to give the ballroom another once-over, in all its lacy, velvety, warmly-lit glory. Not many guests have left yet, but to his secret relief everyone seems to have more or less mellowed out, picking at dessert or mingling on the wooden dance floor. There's Sayaka, still plunking away on the grand piano and singing her heart out, and Toko sidled up to her on the bench, turning pages at her nod.
Celeste, seated a couple tables over, indulging in her own coffee and sliding her untouched cake towards a sleepy-looking Chihiro. By some miracle Hiro's managed to rope Byakuya into a fourth (fifth?) dance, and even more miraculously, Byakuya looks completely okay with this fate. Mondo's over in the far corner, practically hanging off of Makoto at this point; he gives Kiyotaka a wave when their eyes meet.

Still no sign of Leon. Should've known it wouldn't be that easy. *He's really going to make me get up and look for him, isn't he.*

Kiyotaka has to force himself out of his plush, comfy chair, making sure to snatch up his coffee too. Perhaps he should start his search with the restroom, and then move outside if that's unsuccessful. And maybe, while he's at it, he can get Sayaka to finally take a well-earned break.

Come to think of it, she might be good to ask about his husband's whereabouts. She'd only ever chalk it up to intuition, but sometimes Kiyotaka could *swear* she has a built-in Leon radar.

So Kiyotaka makes a beeline for the piano—brushes past the cheery redheaded photographer; nearly collides into Hina, who's giggling and tugging Kyoko away by a gloved hand—spares another glance at Hiro, briefly considers enlisting *his* help, concludes it would be more trouble than it's worth—then suddenly doesn't need any extrasensory assistance after all. Because right there, outside one of the floor-length windows, he spots exactly what he's looking for: a tuft of orange.

The balcony. Of course.

Kiyotaka's quick to switch directions (but careful not to spill his precious coffee), heading straight for the glass doors leading into open air and his husband. Leon's out there alone, facing away from him, arms folded across the railing. At some point he must have shed his jacket, in favor of rolling up his sleeves and loosening his tie; Kiyotaka can only hope he put it somewhere safe.

Leon turns around when Kiyotaka unlatches the door, and then he beams, face flushed with delight (and probably liquor, too).

"Hey," he says, tipping his champagne flute towards Kiyotaka. "Fancy running into you."

Kiyotaka can't resist mirroring his grin. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

"Oh, you know. Thinking. Playing the brooding, mysterious partygoer." Leon tosses him a wink, swirling his drink around as he speaks. "Eat your heart out, Kirigiri."

"At your own wedding?"

"Hey, *someone's* gotta do it. Besides"—he sweeps an arm around the brass-wrought balcony—"This place is, like, perfect for it. Made for brooding mysteriously."

"And you didn't invite me?" Kiyotaka pouts, feigning disapproval. "I'm wounded, darling."

"Eh. You looked like you could use a little rest."

"Surely you're aware by now that I don't rest."

"I didn't say you were going to. Just that you could stand to."

"That's funny, it almost sounds as if you intend to make me."

"I *mean…"* Leon nudges him playfully. "Considering our honeymoon starts

tomorrow, yes, actually, I do."

Kiyotaka chuckles. "Very well. I suppose I'll look forward to it."

"You better."

The ensuing silence is a comfortable one, floating in with the muffled riff of a jazzy piano tune. It's strange, Kiyotaka thinks, that they've never needed so many words between themselves, with how loud they both tend to be otherwise. Maybe they cancel each other out, somehow.

Leon's neglected the railing altogether now, having apparently decided that Kiyotaka is more suitable to lean on instead. Not that Kiyotaka minds, so long as his husband's got a better grip on his glass than Mondo did.

His husband. How long until thinking of him like that stops feeling so surreal? Will it ever?

"Nice sunset tonight," Leon mumbles into his drink. "Pretty."

There's only a few dregs of it left (both his champagne and the sunlight), but he's right: the pinks and purples and spots of orange that linger are very pretty.

Kiyotaka takes hold of Leon's free hand—the left one, with the lone ring—and carefully laces their fingers together, scanning the sky and the impeccably-maintained garden below them. "Yes, especially from up here. This balcony's got a lovely view." A peek at Leon, who's got the sappiest look on his face. Kiyotaka wishes he had a camera with him. "It was nice of Byakuya to suggest this place."

"Mm-hmm. And to pay for it, too."

"…right." Kiyotaka hadn't been too keen on that part of it, but he intended to keep that to himself. He couldn't have turned such an offer down, not when Leon was so excited about it.

"D'you think Kuya was just lookin' for a reason to"—Leon yawns—"bring Hiro here with 'im?"

"I would think he could do that any time he wanted, no?"

"Oh, absolutely. But you know Byakuya. He can't just want to do things." Leon makes some vague, grand gesture with the nearly-empty flute. "Always gotta have some highfalutin excuse at the ready. And if he doesn't have one, he's gotta *make* one." A shrug. "But hey, I'm not complaining."

Kiyotaka throws a glance over his shoulder, towards the ballroom. "Well, he certainly got what he wanted. Hiro's hardly let him leave the dance floor all evening."

"Good for Hiro. Dude knows how to get his money's worth."

"Mm." *Hiro didn't pay for any of this*, would have been Kiyotaka's instinctive response, but something tells him Leon meant it in a more figurative sense. That Hiro's making rge most out of his time here with Byakuya, or something to that effect.

Good for him, indeed.

“Leon?”

“Yes, honey.” Equal parts sarcastic and sweet.

“How come you’re not wearing any of your jewelry?”

“Hmm?” Leon lifts their still-joined hands to flash his wedding band. “What, this doesn’t count?”

But that coy smile gives him away: he knows exactly what Kiyotaka meant.

“What about all your other rings?” Kiyotaka smiles back. “The ones I normally couldn’t *pry* off of you if I tried?”

“Oh, those.” Leon’s eyes dance in the fading sunset light. “Guess I forgot ‘em.”

“Really, now.”

“Aw, whatever. No big deal. I mean”—a nod back down at their hands—“this ring’s the most important one. Especially today. All the others would’ve just gotten in the way, right?”

…ah. So that was it. Leon really *does* feel the same way—a fact Kiyotaka knows well, has learned over and over again, and yet it leaves him reeling every single time.

“I see,” he croaks out, looking away, hiding in his tepid coffee. Then, with only a little more composure, “That’s incredibly thoughtful of you.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t say that. It’s a special day, this is a special ring. Made sense, y’know?” Leon tilts his head back into Kiyotaka’s view, a teasing gleam in his ice-blue eyes. “But don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not throwing out my collection anytime soon, got it?”

Kiyotaka raises a brow. “Of course. I don’t want you stifling your own self-expression just because we’re married now. I like you the way you are.”

He meant it as an offhand comment, but it seems to catch Leon by surprise, and Kiyotaka gets the absolute *joy* of watching him blush furiously before burying his face in Kiyotaka’s shoulder. “You are *so* embarrassing.”

“What? I’m *agreeing* with you!”

“You didn’t have to agree with me like that!”

Kiyotaka rolls his eyes, smiling like an idiot for the millionth time today. “Noted. I’ll make sure any and all future compliments are strictly backhanded.”

That earns him a lighthearted swat to the chest. “I would’ve”—Leon stifles a laugh—“Goddammit, I would’ve just married *Byakuya* if that’s what I wanted.”

A single, cursory attempt to form that mental image, and Kiyotaka’s laughing too. He can’t tell if it’s the coffee, or his husband, or both, but he’s feeling much livelier than he was only a few minutes ago. Still tired—he is no superhuman, after all—but his feet no longer ache so bad, his body no longer screams at him for rest. He’s ready to party, at least for a little longer. Ready to make as much of his time with Leon as he possibly can.

Inside, Sayaka’s changed up the music, smoothly shifted the jazzy song towards something slower and more saccharine. Something closer to what Kiyotaka and Leon danced to earlier. Kiyotaka looks her way again, and an idea comes to mind.

This is *their* wedding. Why should Hiro get to have all the fun?

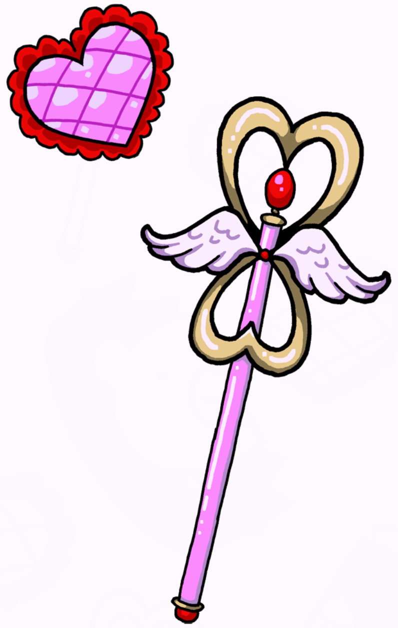
“Hey.” He steps back, puts just enough distance between himself and Leon to properly come face-to-face without letting go of his hand.

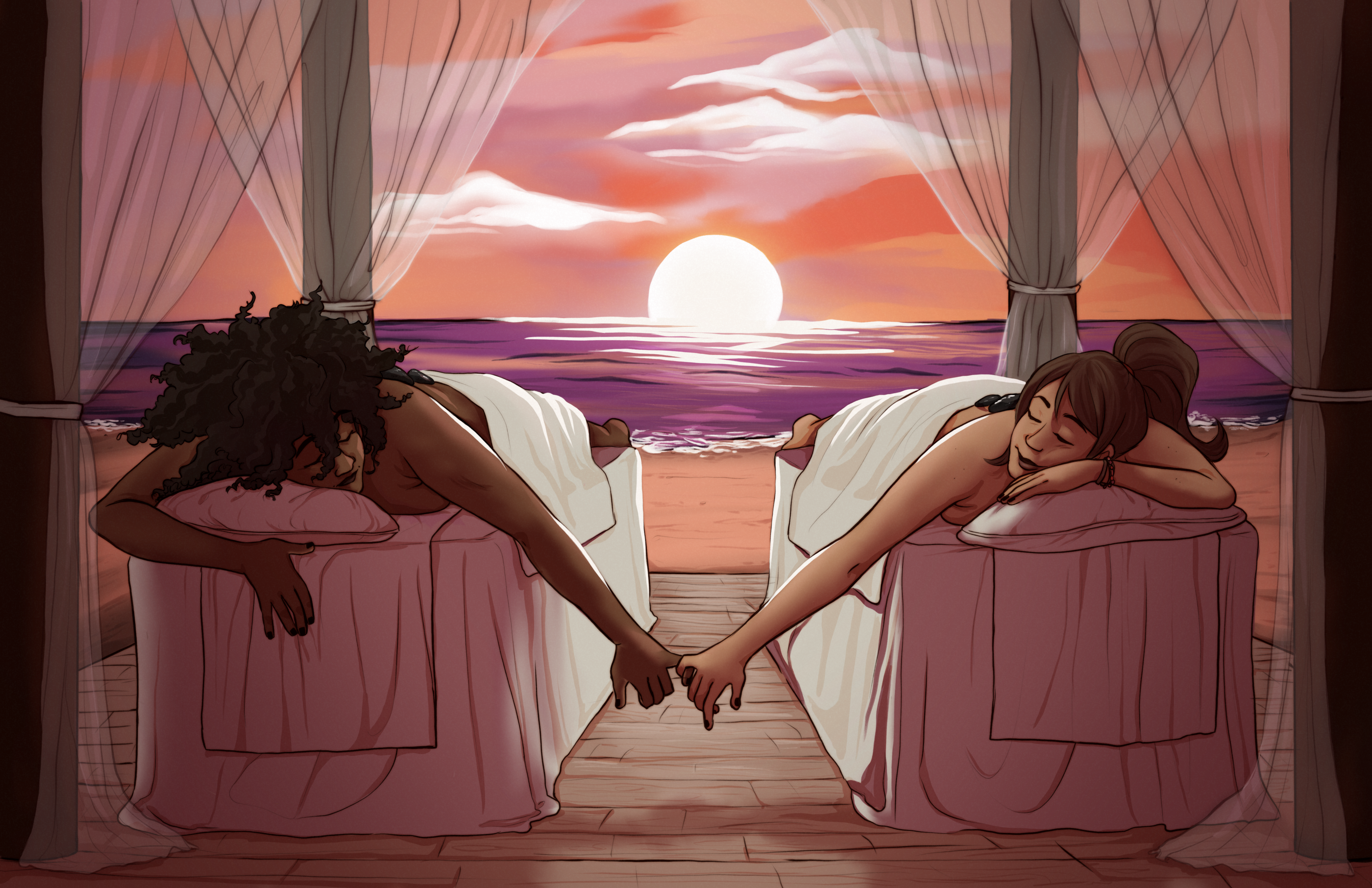
Leon gives him an amused, expectant look. “Yeah?”

Instead of answering him, Kiyotaka bows deep and lifts Leon’s hand to his lips, savoring how the gold ring presses to his skin. He lingers for a moment, before coming back up to claim his reward: a stunned and thoroughly flustered grin on his husband’s face.

“What do you say to another dance?”

Leon only nods, and Kiyotaka barely gives him a chance to set his empty glass on the railing before leading him back to the ballroom.





All My Secrets

By: Rannas

The music from the live orchestra echoes in the bathroom as Maki washes her hands. The unfamiliar sounds of classical strings bounce off the high vaulted ceilings and marble tiles. Everything here drips in ostentatious wealth. She looks at the gold faucets and diamond-encrusted mirrors and wonders how the owners would react to the cracked tile and cloudy mirrors she was used to back in her days at the orphanage.

Maki adjusts her hair to ensure the pins are in place. Nothing could go wrong tonight. She made it into the party without any issues, but this was the type of job where one slip-up could cost her everything. She hasn't made an error in a long time. And tonight could not be when she ends that streak of success, not with so much on the line. She just has to end one life to save so many others.

Not that she's any sort of savior. It's a job. And whether her mark is a sinner or saint is none of her business.

"Need anything, ma'am?" The attendant asks, interrupting her thoughts.

Maki smooths down her black dress, taking one last look in the fancy mirror. Nothing strange, just a woman at a party with her long hair pulled up. To anyone else, the pins are elegant baubles, not tools for murder. To them, a black dress is sophisticated and modern, not easy to conceal blood, and with a slit making it easier to move quickly. She isn't dressed nicely for herself; it is all about what she came here to do.

"...No."

And she exits without another word.

Another worker passes by with a tray of champagne flutes, and she grabs one to avoid engaging with others while still blending in. Maki brings the liquid to her lips but doesn't sip, using the moment instead to scan the party. Many are dancing, and some guests are gathered around a table full of food. All dressed in finery that she imagines costs more than she will ever possess in her lifetime.

But she's not here to judge. They were born into luxury, and she was born into—

She spots her target.

"Harukawa-san–"

Maki stiffens at the sound of her name, almost afraid to turn. Her veins ran cold at the prospect of one familiar face ruining the entire mission.

Usually, at such a function, Kirumi would be working. At the core of it, she is a maid, and serving people is her duty. But lately, her duties have… expanded. Ever since accepting an offer from the Togami conglomerate, her sponsor has felt that her talents had a bit more scope than just laundry and dusting (not that she still didn't do those things).

For once, she wasn't here to serve million-yen champagne or hors d'oeuvres. *No*. Kirumi was here for information. Information that was much easier to obtain when not seen as a mere servant.

Hence, the fancy attire and not her usual maid garb. Being in clothes suited for being seen and not serving others felt odd. Kirumi also wasn't quite sure what to do with herself without tasks to fulfill. Being idle was not a normal part of her day. But her real work at this event could not begin yet. Guests still surrounded the man she intended to get more information on. And she needed him alone.

The other attendees appeared to be eating, drinking, or dancing—all reasonable things to do as guests at such a party. So she needed to do so as well. Blending in as a maid was easy. She was too good at her job to even be considered by the others. But blending in with the other ostentatious guests of the party was a whole different beast.

Grabbing a drink seems to be a safer bet, much more than having to speak with others. But as she approaches the table where food is laid out (decently, but she has noticed several areas where the arrangement could be improved), her eyes catch on a familiar face.

Harukawa. A classmate from Hope's Peak. The SHSL Child Caregiver, or so she told people, to keep her cover. How very interesting… An assassin at an event like this. One filled with influential people and political figures. It is simultaneously shocking and utterly unsurprising to find one of her profession here.

Her former classmate's outfit fits in well enough. Black and tight and expensive looking, with gold jewelry to accent and pin her hair up. Hardly the type of outfit that one would expect to be concealing weaponry, but Kirumi was sure it was. Not that Harukawa was not also capable of ending a life with her bare hands. Kirumi may not have witnessed such an act, but she had seen enough of her physical prowess to know it would be nothing to her.

But despite the expensive garb, Harukawa still seems out of place. Her red eyes flickering across the room and body language screaming do not approach, which is precisely what Kirumi does.

"Harukawa-san…"

She watches as the other tenses, eyes scanning every inch of Kirumi. She can't help but admire her dedication and attention to detail.

"Tojo."

"It's been a long time," Kirumi replies, putting on her best calming smile.

"Yeah." Maki reaches up as if to toy with her hair, but her hand reaches nothing. "Guess it has been a while."

"Didn't expect to see you here," Kirumi remarks, her words loaded.

Something Harukawa obviously picks up on, "You either." Her lips are tight, and her gaze keeps sweeping the room. But Kirumi feels that whoever Harukawa is here for, she has lost sight of them.

Kirumi tilts her head, her bangs falling over her eyes, "Perhaps we could dance and catch up for a moment."

It is easily one of her most selfish requests. Dancing provides the perfect way to blend in and overhear conversation without arousing suspicion—something she finds much harder to do as a guest rather than a servant at this event.

It's not a request she expects Harukawa to take her up on. The girl is hardly the dancing type.

"Fine." She replies, chewing her lip, brows furrowed.

She is not often taken by surprise, but as a maid, she knows how to handle it with grace and aplomb. Kirumi curtsies and offers her hand.

* * *

The music starts again, and Maki reaches out to meet Kirumi's gloved hand. Quickly, the other woman takes the lead. Kirumi guides Maki's hand to her waist as the maid's hand sweeps across her back, and before the assassin can catch her breath, they are moving. Or dancing. Maki stumbles slightly, but Kirumi almost easily guides her back to the rhythm.

All of this is so new. Swaying along to the classical music as their fancy dresses swish around them. But somehow, Kirumi is making it feel… *easy*.

And for a moment, Maki lets herself wonder what it would be like to be a regular guest at this party. One who felt normal taking a heated towel in the fancy restroom. One who knew what song was playing or what the steps were to the dance Tojo was leading them in. Some other universe where she could just chat and dance without a care in the world, drunk on atmosphere and expensive champagne.

But that kind of life was never meant for her. Hers is a life of darkness and death, where the smell of blood is all too familiar. And as comfortable as she felt following Tojo's lead, like every other moment of pleasure in her life, Maki knew it was too good to last.

"Something on your mind?" Tojo asks before leading Maki into a spin.

"Not really."

"Hmmm." Tojo hums, clearly not buying it. Unsurprising, Maki is well aware of how observant the maid is. "I cannot imagine you are merely here for the party Harukawa-san."

Maki mirrored her question just as her feet were mirroring Tojo's as they continued their dance, "Didn't realize you went to parties like this either."

"Not in this capacity." A gentle smile plays on the maid's lips, "A welcome turn of fate to meet an old friend in such an unexpected place."

Maki knows Tojo is clever enough to understand why Maki would be at a party. There are no subtle warnings about stopping her.

The song changes and slows, and Tojo effortlessly transitions them to a new set of footwork. Maki follows along once more, easing into the rhythm set by Tojo, who is once again making it feel easy as if she grew up dancing these fancy dances. Maki's dress swishes by her ankles, and the assassin can feel the gentle and firm grip of Tojo's hands on her own and at her hip. And for a moment, she looks up and forgets the real reason she's here. There's a steely warmth in Tojo's grey gaze and the slightest of smiles on her face.

"I hope I am not monopolizing your time, Harukawa-san." Tojo spins her out, hesitating as if waiting for Maki to take her leave. Which she should, but Maki spins back into the other's grip instead, and the dance resumes.

"Don't you have better things to do than dance with me?" Maki returns. Her eyes dart between Tojo's and over towards the center of the party where her target still stood. They turn, and she loses sight. No matter. She has to wait until he leaves and is on his own to make her move.

"Parties like this are the perfect time to catch up with old friends," Tojo responds, but Maki notices how her eyes keep glancing around as well.

"You always seem to care more about your job than any of that."

"Putting my duty first, yes. But don't you do the same?" Tojo replies with a tight smile. Maki can't disagree. While they aren't exactly in the same position, there is something to be said for someone who understands the sacrifices that must be made. Maybe Tojo is the first person who could genuinely grasp the stakes of her profession without judgment or fear.

The music winds down, and their gloved hands slowly break apart. "A pleasure, Harukawa-san." Tojo gives a slight bow. Maki isn't sure how to respond. It was nice, gliding around, feeling like she belonged at this party. And dancing with someone who understood and did not fear her felt much better than she expected.

Maki shrugs and tugs at her dress as she feels her cheeks warm up. "Yeah… thanks." It was helpful to get closer to her target via the dance floor. That's what matters—not the moments of distraction in how regal and lovely Tojo looked, not dressed in maid garb for once. That doesn't matter, not when her target had taken a call and left the crowd, disappearing into the unoccupied parts of the lavish mansion.

Adjusting her hairpin, Maki turns to duck down the dark hallway at the edge of the party.

◆

Kirumi scans the party for her target but finds nothing. Maki had practically vanished from her side after their waltz, like a shadow in the night. Part of her wishes that she could abandon her duties and follow. A strange urge. One that did not spring from her devotion to her job but rather one of her own curiosities.

Ikeda Junichiro. That's all who matters now. Not old classmates with long shiny dark hair and surprisingly soft expressions as she spun under her arm.

Her thoughts must go back to the threat at hand, the information she was paid to obtain. And tonight, she was going to get it by any means necessary.

Like a game of chess, she moves closer and closer, bit by bit. A pawn can only take small moves, but in the right hands can be a powerful piece, just like herself— the dutiful servant who would go to any lengths to serve.

Beyond the gap in the hallway, she sees a familiar sight: crimson eyes and a black dress. Harukawa's tied-up hair was now loose, and Kirumi could see the shine of a sharp edge on her hairpieces clasped in the assassin's hands.

How clever. A weapon concealed as a harmless accessory. Most would be none the wiser, especially since most expect danger in the form of large, bulky men, not women who are barely above 160 cm.

And, of course, she is also after Ikeda. A man with many enemies. But also a dangerous man. One who could not be taken out lightly. So it only made sense whoever hired her went after the best, the assassin worthy of being scouted by the illustrious Hope's Peak.

Kirumi may be a pawn, but Harukawa was a knight, dashing across the board in sweeping motions to take out the enemy.

Allowing Harukawa to complete the job and win the match would simply not do. Dead men tell no secrets. And Togami sent her here to ensure they could decimate every little bit of influence this despicable man had. To expose the crimes, he had hidden for years. Because otherwise, if he dies, someone just as awful will simply step in. And that was her true goal.

A plan begins to form in her mind. A complicated dance before Ikeda meets the end he deserves. She only needs the perfect partner to make it happen.

She darts across the hall unseen and yanks the assassin into a closet.

"What are you doing Tojo?" Harukawa hisses.

It was time to do what Kirumi knew best. She places her hands over the others, still gripped onto the knife-like gold piece, "Let me offer you my aid, Harukawa-san."

Silence. She feels Harukawa's hands loosen under her own.

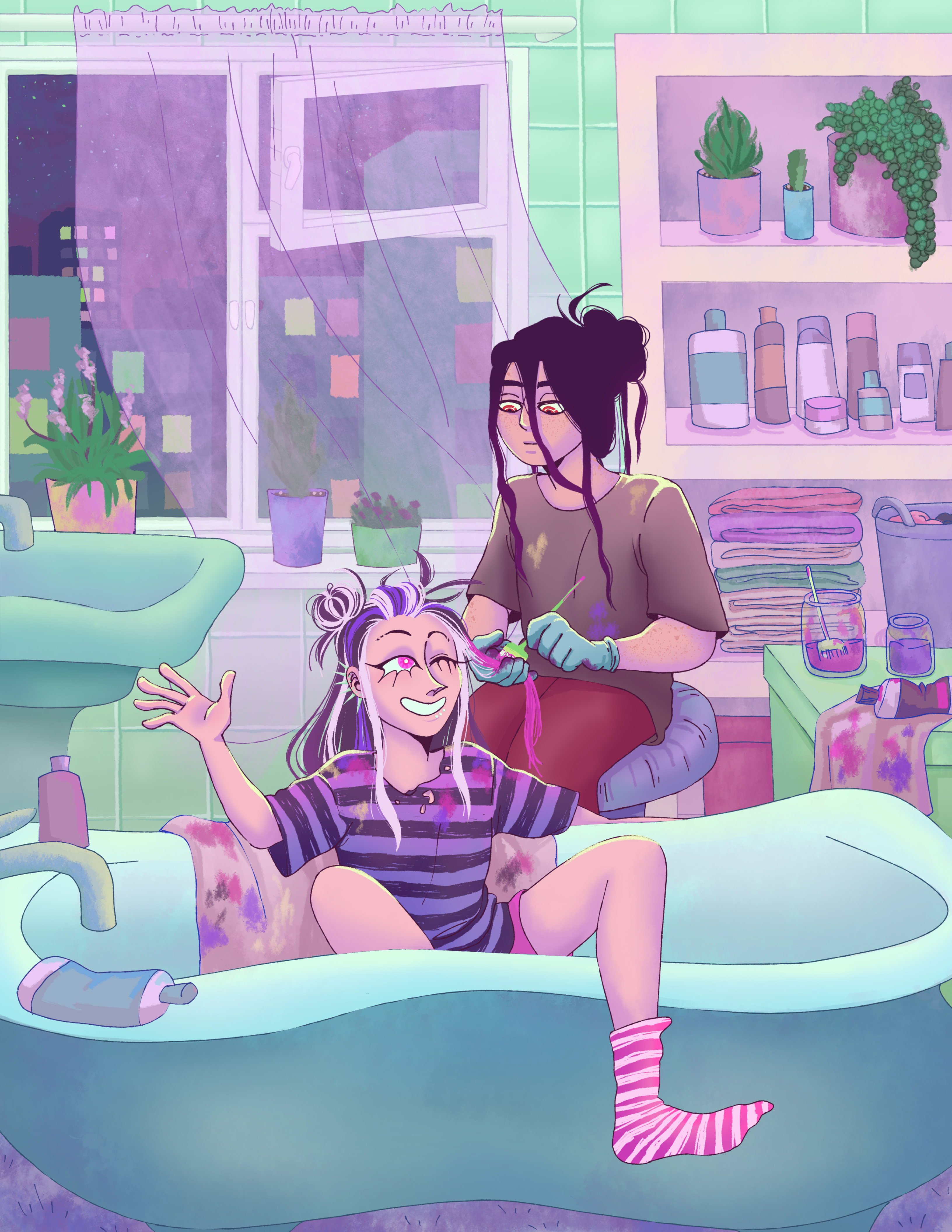
"Okay."

A short answer, but it's enough. Kirumi knows Harukawa would not agree to cooperate so lightly. She must understand that it's for the best and that together, they could not fail.

She opens the door, and the light shines on Harukawa's face. Her expression is unreadable but not angry as she would expect. Kirumi bows her head, "Let us complete our mission, my lady."

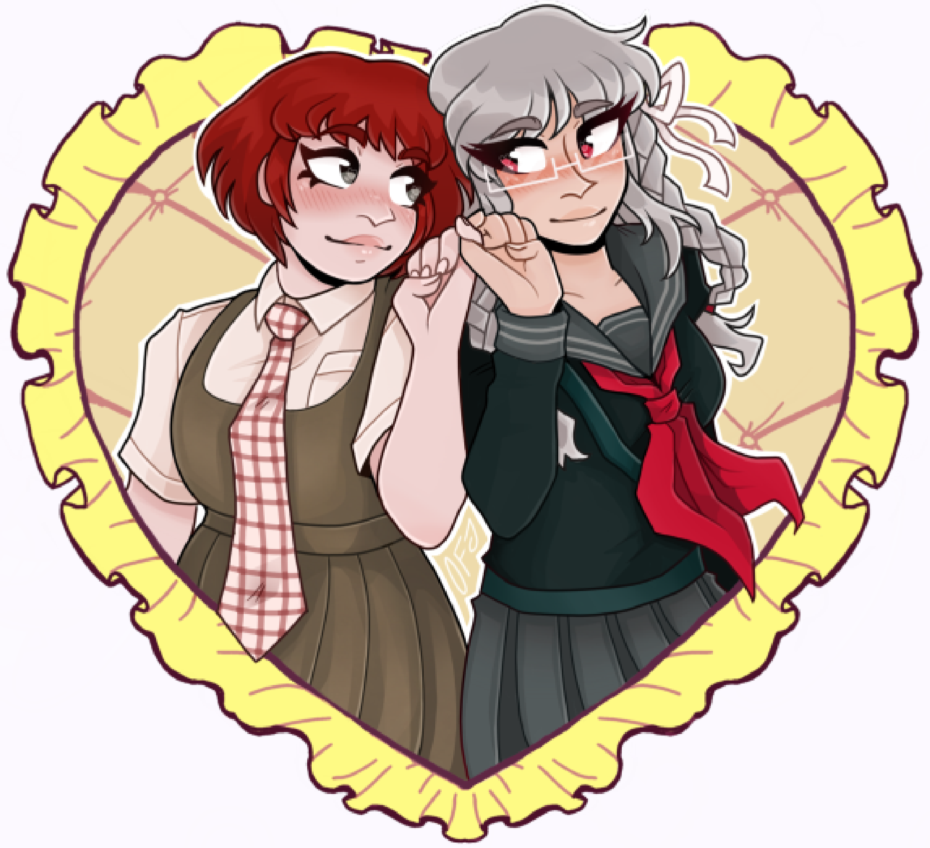
Harukawa seems flustered for a split second but quickly regains her composure, her expression back to cold steel as she simply nods in response, and the two silently resume tailing their shared target.

With Harukawa at her side, Kirumi knew the task at hand would be completed to her usual standard of perfection.



A Pretty Picnic with a Pretty Girl in The Pretty Sky

By: Preppycat



Pekoyama rented a helicopter.

Pekoyama (a girl recently engaged to a gorgeous girl as well as being an extremely talented swordswoman and fired from her regular job) did so with the intention of finally getting to spoil her long-suffering partner.

Poor, poor Koizumi. Pekoyama has been neglecting their relationship a little too much in favour of her work, but in the end, it wasn't even worth it. She still isn't entirely sure of her reason for being fired, but she is sure she isn't happy about it.

Her girl deserves to do something fun and extravagant, to be spoiled after everything and luckily enough, Pekoyama has some connections and a license to fly a helicopter.

What better way for them to catch up than a luxurious picnic in the sky?

Above: @OFJ.art

Koizumi was terrified of flying.

But she (a semi-famous photographer who does some freelance writing on the side) isn't about to let it show. Not when she could see just how excited her finacée was about this little date, especially since they hadn't been able to have a proper date together in who knows how long. She could see how desperate and eager she is as well; Pekoyama must've been feeling really bad.

The silver-haired girl squeezes her hand and flashes her a bright smile over her shoulder, totally oblivious to the swirling conflict and fear going on inside of the photographer's mind. She tugs her inside the rental company, eagerly bringing her to the front desk.

While Pekoyama explains her connections and their appointment to the receptionist, Koizumi's legs feel like they're going to give out. She needs to rationalize.

She needs to trust her partner. Peko would never put her in danger. There are procedures if something goes wrong. They're going to have a fun day with no worries.

When her partner asks her if she's ready to go further into the building and get ready to depart, she doesn't hesitate for a second.

She'll shove these nerves down as far as they can go and power through.

Today is going to be a great day. They're going to feel like queens.

* * *

Five shiny helicopters are lined up all along the roof, close but not dangerously close to the edge.

"The one on the far right is the most luxurious," Pekoyama explains with a point, "It'll be perfect for our picnic in the sky, no?"

"Y-Yeah...Peko, are you really sure this is okay to do?!"

"Of course, it's perfectly okay to do!" She smiles, "We will be perfectly okay. Now come. The more we dilly-dally, the less time we'll have."

Pekoyama struts with confidence toward her chosen aircraft, Koizumi hurrying to catch up.

"Say, P-Peko, do you actually know how to f-fly one of these?"

The swordswoman shrugs. "How hard can it be?" She rolls her eyes, seeing the horrified look on Mahiru's face, "Relax, please. Of course, I do. I can even show you my license if you'd like."

Pekoyama flings open the door before offering a hand to Koizumi to help her into the aircraft. The photographer heaves herself up, moving up into the front seats. She settles herself on the passenger's side with the picnic basket on the floor. She pulls the seatbelt tightly over her body before putting on her headset.

The swordswoman climbs in as well, pulling the door shut behind her. She settles herself beside her finacée with a smile. "Alright, are you ready?"

Koizumi shrugs. "I mean, I guess?" She chuckles nervously, "I see no reason to back out at this point anyway."

That was a lie; she could think of at least twenty off the top of her head.

Pekoyama nods, starting up the aircraft and easing it into the air. Koizumi grips the sides of her armrests for dear life, convinced they will plummet back to Earth at any second. The swordswoman glances at her out of the corner of her eye and sighs.

"I've had the license for years, Mahiru. Please calm down. I won't let you get hurt," She promises, "Why don't you get out the champagne served?"

"You're going to drink and fly?"

"Of course not. But you should start enjoying yourself."

Koizumi considers arguing but ultimately decides against it. She groans, leaning back in his seat and popping the cork off, pouring herself a tall glass.

Pekoyama smiles. "There. See? Once you start enjoying yourself, you'll see that this isn't so bad."

◆

Pekoyama and Koizumi have retired to the back of the helicopter.

The silver-haired girl has set the aircraft to autopilot (not to say that she still wasn't keeping a close eye on things for the tiniest hint that something is about to go wrong) so that she can thoroughly relax with her finacée before they land and have to figure out what they'll be doing next.

The two had filled the small space in the back with lots of soft blankets and fluffy pillows to ensure maximum comfort. The colours complement each other quite nicely, being of purples and pinks and certain shades of blue.

The photographer yawns, leaning back against a pillow and downing the last of her flute of champagne with a lazy smile on her face. Pekoyama can't help but giggle at the sight, sipping her juice box with one hand and rummaging through the picnic basket with the other.

"Y'know, Peks?" Koizumi sighs, setting the flute down, "I think I changed my mind; this was actually a nice idea. I must admit, I am having a good time."

The swordswoman hums, pulling out a sandwich wrapped in tinfoil and offering it out to her. "I am delighted to hear that. Now, are you hungry? It's chicken salad."

Koizumi leans forward again. "Mmm, do you have tuna salad?"

"Oh, yes, of course, my mistake."

She sets that sandwich down beside her before reaching into the picnic basket and offering her a different sandwich. "This one should be the correct one."

"Thank you. What's for dessert again?"

"Cold strawberries dipped in chocolate. By that, I mean the bottom halves now have chocolate shells since it was refrigerated for that effect."

"Oh, Peko, never stop over-explaining things."

The silver-haired girl hums, unwrapping her sandwich and frowning when a part of the chicken salad falls out and lands on the floor. She swiftly picks it up and disposes of it in the compost bag she brought.

"So, what is the plan for when we're done with the picnic?" Koizumi asks, absentmindedly picking at a piece of bread.

"Whatever you'd like to do, of course. Perhaps baths and a movie under some fluffy blankets?"

"Sounds lovely. For now."

The cherry-haired girl hums. "For now. Speaking of which, what are your next long-term plans? Do you intend to find another job immediately, or are you just going to hang out for a while?"

The swordswoman's eyebrow twitches. "Hmm. I think travelling for a while would be just lovely—a long while. Getting away for a while, as long as possible, would surely do me good. Or we could move to Alaska! I could provide for you!"

Koizumi pulls the picnic basket closer to herself, rooting around inside and pulling out a can of iced tea. "Peko, it sounds like you're done with this city…" She chuckles nervously.

The silver-haired girl bows her head. "Yes…To be perfectly honest, I'm ready for a fresh start. But I still most definitely want you with me."

The cherry-haired girl goes stiff, gawking back at her finacée. Pekoyama looks dead-serious, staring back at her partner with passion-filled determination.

"Y-You're asking me to…run away with you? For real?"

"Yes."

"B-But Peko…Our entire life is here! Our friends and family are here. My career is here! Do you really think it would be okay just to drop everything and leave?"

The swordswoman sighs. "Mahiru, the only thing left for me here is you."

Koizumi is stunned into silence.

"Think about it," Pekoyama persists, "The only friends I hang out with are actually just your friends. I've never had any real family or a job I could really feel passionate about; I've never really cared for this city…You just outstretch all of that."

The photographer averts her gaze, taking a long draw of her champagne. Her cheeks nearly turn the same colour as her hair.

So Pekoyama has been miserable and suffered all of this time…for her sake? Because she loves Koizumi so much and wants her to be happy?

However, Koizumi could be happy anywhere with her betrothed as well. And she doesn't want her partner to be unhappy on her account…

Fresh starts are good a lot of the time. But on the other hand-Ah, she could go back and forth all afternoon.

"Of course, the decision is entirely up to you," Pekoyama assures her, "Feel completely free to disregard my trivial feelings. I don't know what I am doing or feeling, quite honestly. With you, I could be happy anywhere, anytime."

"Could I…Could I have some time to think about it?" She asks weakly.

The silver-haired girl leans back, hugging a particularly fluffy pillow to her chest. "Of course," She replies disinterestedly, "Take all of the time in the world."

* * *

Pekoyama lands the helicopter back on top of the building, exactly where they were instructed to once they were done with it.

Neither of them had spoken another word for the duration of the joyride picnic; both lost in their minds.

Then again, nothing beats denial.

No, that isn't it.

Nothing beats unconditional love and prioritizing your partner's happiness over everything else, especially if you are to build a long life with them.

"...I hear there is a city a couple of hours away from here that has a really nice nightlife as well as really lovely apartments. Maybe we can start there?" The photographer suggests.

Her betrothed instantly brightens. "R-Really? You would be willing to..?"

"More than anything, I want you to be happy and comfortable, Peko," Koizumi's smile is soft and gentle, "And besides, it's a win-win. We're far but close enough to come back for occasional visits."

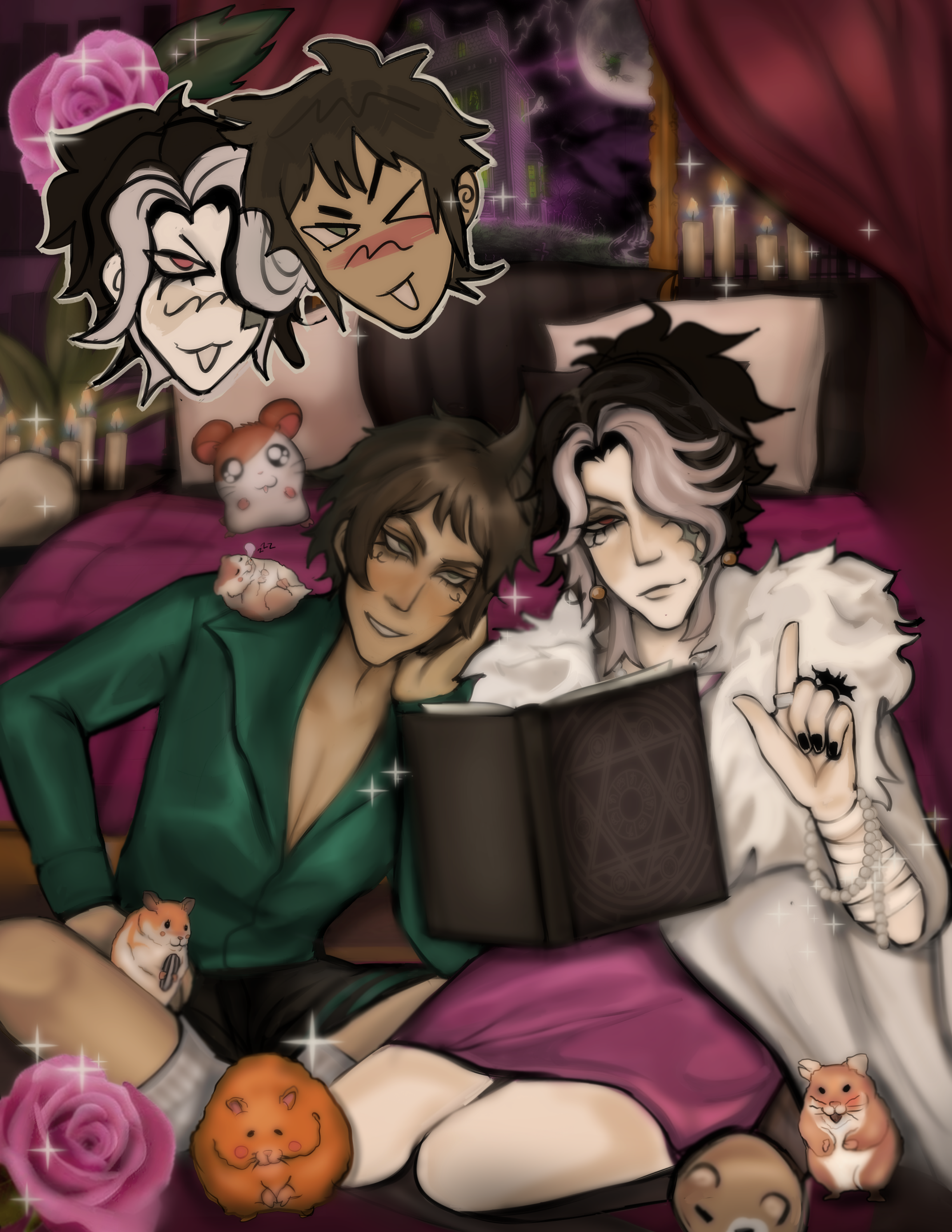
"But Mahiru, are you really sure?"

"Never more sure of anything in my life."

Pekoyama pulls her partner close into a tight hug. Koizumi lets out a short laugh, relishing the feeling of her darling's arms around her.

"Well, let's go home then and start making preparations?"

"Sounds splendid to me."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Take Me Away

By: KILLC0MMAND

Of all the places Kaede expected to get lost, a cruise ship to New Zealand wasn't one of them.

And yet there she stood on the top deck, frantically whipping her head left and right in search of a familiar face and a head full of light green hair. It hadn't even been an hour since they'd boarded, and her friend was already missing. Either that, or she'd gotten herself lost, but it was easier to shift the blame off of herself for the time being anyway.

Kaede sighed, shoulders slumped in resignation in place of her prickling anxiety – it really was going to be a *long* trip.

"Ah… excuse me?" A small, whispery voice piped up from behind. Kaede swiftly turned around to face someone who appeared to be a short young girl with cropped brown hair. The nervous look on their face reminded Kaede of a timid woodland creature, but perhaps that was a little judgemental. Regardless, she smiled brightly at the other, "Yes, is there something wrong?"

"N-no, it's just… I'm sorry, but I was wondering if you could help me find my cousin. She tends to fall asleep in random places, so I'm a little concerned," they mumbled, eyes looking downcast as they spoke. Suddenly their head piped up again in fear, "Oh, but please don't feel obligated! I haven't had any luck finding her, but you just seemed trustworthy, so I—"

Kaede quickly stepped forward and took a hold of their small hands, clasping them firmly in her own as she shook her head, "It's completely okay!" She said, "I don't mind at all – I was actually looking for my friend as well, so it's really not a bother."

She smiled warmly at the other, who seemed to melt at her reassuring words and beamed right back. "By the way, I didn't catch your name! Also I, uh, think I'd also need a description of her."

"A description of her, huh? Well, I'd say that she's a little taller than me, with short pink hair, pink eyes, and she's wearing a light knee-length orange dress… I think." The shorter one hummed thoughtfully before chirping, "Oh! And also my name is Chihiro Fujisaki!"

Chihiro meant to offer their hand in greeting, only to look down between them and realize that the other was still holding them. After a beat of realization, Kaede only squeezed Chihiro's hands again in response, "It's nice to meet you! My name is Kaede Akamatsu." Kaede dipped her head in a small bow instead, the other quickly following right after her, "Don't worry Fujisaki-san, I'll find your cousin for you."

She and Chihiro exchanged a few more words before they parted ways; Chihiro informing Kaede of their room number in case she found her.

With determination fuelling her once again, Kaede continued her search for not only her friend, but also a fellow tourist – who'd hopefully turn out to be a new friend. She didn't bother going back to the places she'd already searched, as she recalled that none of the people she'd come across matched the description of Chihiro's cousin. If nothing else, Kaede prided herself on her memory, and perhaps that was due in part to her background as a professional pianist.

The next half hour was spent combing the ballroom, dining hall, and front of the ship to no avail. When she'd finally made it to the last possible place – the back of the boat, – her breath hitched at the unobstructed view.

The azure sea shimmered like jewels under the midday sun, stretching as far as the eye could see where the sky touched the horizon. Kaede deeply inhaled the briny air, letting the sight burn into her memory, as if she could engrave it behind her eyelids; as much as she loved performing, the beauty of the ocean really couldn't be outdone by the rows upon rows of rhinestones on her recital dresses.

When she finally pried her eyes away from the sea, she'd found her; an exact match for who she was looking for except—

Except, she looked dangerously close to slipping over the rail.

"H-hey… Hey!" Kaede shouted as she ran up to the other as fast as she could in heels, immediately grabbing the girl's shoulders and pulling her away from the edge of the stern, only to find her warm body almost completely pliant in her grasp, eyes shut and a line of drool running down the side of her mouth.

The girl's eyes slowly fluttered open, dazed pink irises peeking through trying to focus on the person above her as her vision adjusted to the midday sunlight. Kaede's silhouette cast a shadow over her face, as she realized that she might've been a little too close to a complete stranger.

But… It was strange how difficult it was to pry her eyes off the girl.

And it was even stranger how she'd made no move to shove Kaede away, let alone react to the fact that her body was limp in her arms. If the burning feeling in her cheeks was anything to go by, Kaede couldn't be sure that this was good for her heart either. Slowly but surely, realization dawned over the girl, a light blush before she broke out into a delicate smile.

"Oh…" she spoke, voice whispery and sweet with a distinct familiarity, "Good morning."

The corner of Kaede's mouth twitched at the odd greeting, but found herself replying anyway, "Good… morning? I'm sorry, but are you by any chance Fujisaki-san's cousin?"

At the mention of their name, the girl's eyes widened. Her expression shifted into one of surprise before she carefully pried herself out of Kaede's arms. Her eyes drifted between the floor and back up at Kaede, who'd finally straightened her posture. "Yes, that would be me," she quietly admitted with a hint of shame before bowing slightly.

"I'm Chiaki Nanami, but Chiaki is fine. I'm really sorry for the trouble; I must've worried my cousin a lot…"

"Ah, my name is Kaede Akamatsu, but you can just call me by my first name too! And honestly, it's fine. I'm just glad you're alright. I think we should just get going and let your cousin know."

"…You'd really go that far to help me?" Chiaki stared at the other with tinted cheeks, who only smiled back with confidence. "It's not that far at all? It's actually rather close to my own room!" Kaede chirped, gently taking Chiaki's warm hand to guide her along. The shorter girl smiled a little, somehow charmed at how the expression flew over the other's head.

"Shall we get going then?"

♡

The two of them caught up to Chihiro, who had immediately latched themself onto Chiaki to pull her into a hug. Any trace of worry had immediately evaporated from their expression, and teary words of relief spilled out instead. Kaede stepped away to give the two some privacy, going a little further down the carpeted hallway. If she recalled correctly, her room was near the very end of this very path; a double room shared with her friend, Rantaro.

And as Kaede sighed and recalled, said friend was *still* missing somewhere on the giant cruise ship. Well, it didn't really matter at this point – they'd run into each other sooner or later anyway, but for now she was happy to have a bit of reprieve from her wild goose chase with a new friend.

Muffled footsteps approached from the back before she felt a gentle tap on her shoulder, turning around to find Chiaki playfully leaning to the side with a smile. A hand reached into her white shoulder-bag to pull out a phone with a pink bunny on the case. "I just got this back fully-charged from Chihiro, so I'm free to go anywhere again."

"Oh! Well…" Kaede started, shyness beginning to rattle her nerves, but she quickly squashed the feeling down, "In that case, do you want to spend some time with me? I mean, you don't have to but—"

Kaede snapped her mouth shut with a click before she could embarrass herself, heat rising to her face the longer the silence stretched between her and the other girl. Chiaki suddenly giggled sweetly, "…I was actually hoping you'd say that."

She spoke slowly, as if pondering every word before her expression turned into a small frown, "There's actually an arcade on this cruise ship that I wanted to show Chihiro, but we… got separated and they wanted to rest for now." Kaede nodded and crossed her arms in thought, a low contemplative hum resounded before the realization struck her.

"Ah, do you mean the recreation room next to the concert hall?"

"Yes! Yes, that one!" And all of a sudden, Chiaki's eyes lit up with an intensity Kaede had never seen before. All this time it had been a dazed expression and words that were a touch too drowsy, but she couldn't say that she didn't like this side of Chiaki either.

Both of them made their way to the floor above them, between the main floor with the lavish dining hall and ballroom and the guest room floor that they had just left. All things considered; it was a rather casual area.

Stepping into the arcade room, they were both overcome with excitement and wonder at the neon lights bathing the room in a soft but colourful glow. The room was lined from corner to corner with arcade machines, and Kaede was truly at Chiaki's mercy when she excitedly tugged her along, jumping from one game to another.

Kaede had little to no experience really, but the hours melted away as they talked about anything and everything under a ceiling full of star-like lights, Chiaki's hand occasionally slipping over Kaede's to help maneuver whenever the latter struggled with a level.

"Y'know… you really scared me back there when you were leaned over the railing and fast asleep." Kaede laughed, finally prying her eyes away from the screen as the credits rolled, "You also had quite the dazed look. Did you have a nice dream?"

"Mm… I'm not sure." She hummed, "I think I was just… startled." Chiaki braved a glance at the other who'd caught her blush matching the tone of her eyes, voice softening in a quiet admission, "…You're really pretty. It surprised me."

Kaede's ears burned at those words. And as if she suddenly forgot how to speak, the response she had caught in her too-dry throat.

How odd, she thought to herself, reminiscing about times she'd have no trouble at all speaking her mind about how she found another girl cute or attractive. It felt so much easier to roll off her tongue all the other times, but *this*? Chiaki Nanami was a different ordeal altogether, and she really didn't know how or why she couldn't get herself to keep calm around the other girl.

Kaede squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and gripped the joystick until her palms grew slick with sweat, only to realize with a leap of her heart that Chiaki's warm hand was still on top of hers.

"A-anyway!" She sputtered, eyes darting back up to the screen, "This ending theme sounds really familiar! I think someone I know composed it because she played a similar song for me once." Kaede nervously rambled, "If you want, we can go to the concert hall, and I can teach you how to play it?"

Chiaki nodded excitedly, eyes sparkling so intensely that Kaede could only chuckle to herself as she took the other's hand again to lead her out of the room. Now that she really thought about it, there really was no reason to keep holding her hand – but if Chiaki wasn't going to say anything about it or pull away, she supposed there was no harm done.

The two of them exited the arcade, wincing a bit as they adjusted to the brightly lit hallway in stark contrast to the galaxy-themed room they'd just spent hours in. Kaede pushed the door to the concert hall open, taking in the sight of the tall ceiling and the stage she was meant to perform on in a few nights. Royal blue velvet curtains were neatly bound to the sides of the stage, and upon it, her grand piano gleaming under the stage lights.

Chiaki let out a small gasp, eyes shining with a different kind of amazement compared to earlier. "You mentioned you were a pianist on tour, weren't you?"

Kaede nodded and beamed at her, "Yep! I'm actually—"

"There you are!" A voice suddenly called out, and Kaede's head whipped around until she found Rantaro standing by the audience seats with his hands digging into the pockets of his white suit.

"What do you mean, 'there you are'?" Kaede bristled, crossing her arms. "I've been looking all over for *you*!"

"Oh…" Rantaro frowned, shrugging lightly, "I just thought I should just stay put and let you find me. Anyway, friend of yours?" He asked, smiling politely in Chiaki's direction when she gave a slight bow.

"Chiaki Nanami," she smiled back before looking over at Kaede beside her,

"And… you could say that we're fast friends!"

Rantaro's expression grew a bit too sly for Kaede's liking when she felt her face burn under his knowing gaze, "I see… ditching your best friend for a girl, huh? Well, don't let me interrupt you two!" He reached into his pocket and tossed the second set of room keys to Kaede, turning to leave the hall with a small wave, "By the way, there's a bottle of champagne near the back of the stage. Have fun, lovebirds!"

Kaede felt Chiaki stiffen a bit from surprise before she let out a laugh, the former shaking her head from shame as they made their way over to the grand piano; Kaede pulled out the gift basket with the sparkling champagne just as Rantaro had mentioned.

"Oh, wait there's… only one glass. Do you want it, Chiaki?"

The girl in question hummed, "Actually, if it's okay with you… I don't mind if we share it," she spoke softly, though the words were clear as day to Kaede as she slowly nodded and began pouring the drink, cursing the way her hands slightly trembled.

It was well past 10 pm; all that was left was the dance, dinner, and fireworks – but it was still far too early for the night to end for them.

Kaede brought herself over with the flute and sat down on the plush bench a little closer than they needed to be, but Chiaki only leaned a little closer, gazing into Kaede's lilac eyes.

"To a fun piano lesson…" she started, a spark of hope swelling in her chest beneath the shyness, "And twenty-nine more days with you."

Kaede laughed, holding out their shared glass to the other, heart feeling fuller than ever, "Cheers?"

Chiaki gave a serene smile and gently wrapped her fingers over Kaede's.

"Cheers!"

JOKER

Bite the Hand That Feeds You

By: Animalcrwossing

Syo stares at themself in the mirror, admiring their outfit. Tonight, Mondo would be taking her out for a fancy treat, and of course they had to dress for the occasion. It was always a little difficult convincing Toko to let them stay in front long enough to go on a proper date with him, especially since she didn't seem to like him that way. But that didn't really matter, did it? Tonight was going to be great, no Toko, no murders, just expensive ice cream and fun!

With a glittery dress and tall heels to match, they were ready and raring to go. The moment Mondo knocks on the door to their dorm room, they're slamming open the door, making their date flinch. He's dressed nicely himself, with a nice button up and slacks, but it's dressed down with his Crazy Diamonds jacket over it all.

"You're here! C'mon c'mon *c'mon*, we gotta go before it gets too late!" Syo blabbers, grabbing him by the arm and attempting to drag him off. They're unsuccessful in their attempt, but Mondo just laughs, letting Syo lead him out to his motorcycle.

"You seem pretty excited, huh?" Mondo notes as they walk outside, their hand in his. "I thought you said you've been there before?"

"Yeah, but that was with Komaru and a couple other people! I wanna go with *you*," Syo replies matter-of-a-factly, waiting for Mondo to get onto his bike before following along with him. He doesn't, though, and before Syo can complain about it, he speaks.

"...Who would have guessed that the resident serial killer is a sweetheart." Pressing a kiss to their temple, he thinks over his words before talking again. "Yeah, I know that sounds like an oxymoron or whatever."

Syo snorts, watching as Mondo boards his motorcycle, then gets on behind him, arms wrapping around his middle. "Wowie, that's a big word from you."

Mondo turns the ignition, revving the engine before replying. "Shut the hell up, dude."

Loudly driving away from the dorms and into the city, Syo leans back a little to admire the woods that line the road. There's nothing special about it, but they've always enjoyed nature. Going outside and running around and playing in the dirt has been something they've always loved doing. Although that doesn't seem very feasible in this outfit, especially if they want to be let into the restaurant in the first place.

They couldn't afford the dinner menu, but they'd scraped together enough yen to get something sweet to share. They'd contemplated doing one of those fake proposals, but considering their reputation as students of Hope's Peak, people would definitely recognize

them and spread the "news," so that was out of the picture.

Syo moves back to nuzzle against Mondo's back when they reach a stoplight, one of his hands meeting theirs at his front for just a moment. Their relationship was pretty unlikely, but he was their best friend beyond it all, and that's what really mattered.

Their peaceful ride to the restaurant is quickly interrupted, however, when another motorcycle cuts out in front of them, forcing Mondo to slow down quickly. Syo's forehead hits the back of his head, and they dramatically whine about it for a split second, before looking at the back of the jacket belonging to the motorcyclist who is now suddenly in front of them.

"Oh shit," Syo says, and that statement couldn't be more correct. The logo belongs to a rival gang of the Crazy Diamonds, and it looks like the person recognized Mondo. Of all nights, this is really when they have to have a run-in?

Mondo curses under his breath, hands gripping the handles hard. "Hold on tight, I'm gonna try to lose 'em, okay?" Serving into the other lane, which is thankfully empty, he accelerates, wind whipping at their faces and hair. In the back of Syo's mind, they think about how this is probably going to mess up their appearances that they worked so hard on, but also, this is a little too important to be thinking about that right now.

A few other motorcycles seem to come out of the woodworks, one bumping against Mondo's. Syo's grip on him tightens significantly when this happens, anxiety rising in their throat. "Umm, babe, I'm gettin' a little worried here," they say, speaking loudly over the rumble of the engines around them. "D'you think we should just go back?"

It looks like something snaps in Mondo, because suddenly, he's revving his engine. "No, we're going, and we're gonna have a good time! I wanna take you out somewhere nice for once, dammit!" And with that, he goes between two motorcycles that were caging them in, knocking one off the road. His bike engine roars as he goes way past what's the legal limit, tires squealing as they take off.

They're almost in the city now, and he knows for a fact that they won't follow there. It'd be a dumb idea to try and race where so many people could interrupt, namely the police. He narrowly dodges another bike trying to cut in front of him, and finally, he slows down hard when they reach a road surrounded by buildings.

The lackeys of the group seem eager to keep trying, but a loud whistle sounds from behind them, and they slow down as well. They're all stopped for the stoplight now, and the group slowly pulls up next to them.

Face red with anger, Mondo lets it all out. “What the *hell*, man? Do you have no respect for people? I’m tryin’ to take my partner out for a nice date, and you’re all messin’ it up!”

The leader just laughs. “Hey, chill out, won’t you? That was a fun race. Why don’t we call it even, huh? Since you beat all of us, I’ll buy your dinner.”

Syo perks up at that. “Free dinner?”

Mondo looks pensive, but eventually, extends a hand for the other to shake. “Fine, but I ain’t gonna order anything cheap.”

“A deal’s a deal!”

And with that, they ride off to the restaurant. Both Mondo and Syo look disastrous. Their hair, clothes, and makeup are all out of place -- Syo’s previously perfectly curled hair is tangled, Mondo’s tie has come undone somehow, both of their eyeliner is smudged. All in all, they look like they came straight from a wild party before arriving. The hostess looks at them in abject horror.

“Reservation for Mondo Oowada,” Mondo says, and the hostess, recognizing his name, only looks more stressed.

“Ah, yes… right this way,” she says, voice wobbling, leading them to their nice, secluded table for two.

Syo happily trots along, while Mondo laughs at their clear enthusiasm. He understands it, though. It’s rare that he gets to eat a meal like this, so he can only guess how excited they are.

Once they’re settled in, Syo’s eyes light up at the menu. *“Woah*. This is expensive!” They kick their feet excitedly. “D’you think we could get some appetizers? What about steak? And tons of sides!”

“Get whatever you want, we’re gettin’ it for free, remember?” Mondo gently reminds them, smiling. “And we’re still gonna get dessert, don’t worry your pretty little head about that one.”

An equally as nervous waiter approaches to take their order, which is rather extensive, and they easily fall into conversation, which is rather loud for the setting. It’s clear neither of them have ever eaten somewhere this nice before.

The food is delicious, and when it finally rolls around to the dessert, they order it to go, much to the relief of everyone in the restaurant.

As Syo carries their box full of desserts to Mondo’s bike, they snicker. “Psst. Guess what I’ve got.” Pulling them from what seems like out of nowhere, they reveal the steak knives from their dinner that they’d clearly stolen. “Little keepsakes! For us!”

Mondo can’t even bother to be upset about it, chuckling and shaking his head.

“Let’s go eat our dessert and head home, yeah?”

Syo nods their head in agreement, and they drive back to the dormitory, thankfully having a peaceful ride on the way back. They sit in the parking lot, huddled together on the pavement, dipping their forks into the mont blanc they’d ordered. This definitely was not a traditional date by any means, but they both had fun despite it all. Besides, neither of them could have behaved well enough during dinner if not for their race earlier to chill them out.

Resting their head on Mondo’s shoulder, Syo sets the empty to-go box aside, a surprisingly gentle smile on their face. “I had a lot of fun tonight. Even though it went totally off the walls.”

“Yeah?” Mondo asks, wrapping an arm around them. “Me too.”

Sighing contentedly, Syo wraps their own arms around Mondo’s middle, squeezing hard for a brief moment. “Can I tell you somethin’? You… don’t have to say it back, but…” Leaning backwards, hands still holding onto their boyfriend, they spill their heart out. “I love you, Mondo. You make me really happy. And I’d really like it if we stayed together for a while longer, even after graduation.” They didn’t really share these sorts of sentiments with other people, so they hope it doesn’t go to waste.

“I love you too, darlin’. I mean it when I say you mean the world to me.” Mondo makes an intense expression before speaking again. “Actually, um… there’s a reason I asked ya out to dinner tonight. I wanted to give you this.” He reaches into his pocket and procures a small ring. It’s incredibly simple, but shiny. “I made this for you. It’s nothing serious, just a promise ring, but… I wanted to promise to you that I’ll love ya for as long as you’ll let me.”

“Mondooo,” Syo whines, eyes watery and wide. “That’s so sweet, oh my gosh.”

Mondo gently puts the ring on Syo’s finger. “I’m glad you like it. I’m not a jewelry maker by any means, but once I’ve got the cash, I wanna get you something nicer. Can I do that?”

“I’ll never say no to that, hehe.” Syo leans up to kiss him, giggling as they pull back. “We should probably go back into the dorms before someone finds us and figures out we snuck out on a school night.”

Mondo raises his eyebrows. “Damn, I didn’t know you had a responsible bone in your body.”

Syo sighs. “Okay, okay, fine, I’ll admit it, I’m too full to stay awake for much longer.”

“Let’s get you to bed, then.”

Walking to the dormitories hand in hand, they end up getting caught anyway. Sure, two weeks of detention is bad, but is it really all that bad when they can spend it together?

Time As A Calm Sea

By: Magioftheseas

Just setting up for the trip had been a lot of work. Komaru buzzed around excitedly at the prospect of a luxury cruise and even lectured her allegedly hapless brother on bringing different outfits rather than several variations of his favorite hoodie.

"It's going to be fancy!" she exclaimed, shoving her phone in his face. "So you gotta dress fancy like this!"

The 'fancy' attire she had on her phone looked more like a clown outfit, but Makoto elected to just smile and nod. Once they got on the boat, he expected that Komaru would be too starstruck by everything else to pay him further mind.

Indeed, Komaru couldn't contain her excitement and spent the day rock-climbing of all things, and meanwhile Makoto…

He began to feel seasick. Like, *really* seasick. The rocking of the boat had made him feel increasingly unsteady and while he loved Komaru with all his heart, he had forgotten how awful it was to spend nights awake while she snored her troubles away.

Even ignoring the snoring, he couldn't rest with how heavily their cabin rocked due to being on one of the lower floors. It was unfortunate.

Still, the rest of the ship was lovely with its elegant decor. From the several striking works of art on display to the chic walls to the plush carpets. Actually, watching the waves somewhat put his stomach at ease with how the deep blue would rise and fall as if the ocean itself was a living, breathing thing. With how far out at sea they were, there was nothing to see besides blue. The endless blue of the sky, the seemingly endless and hypnotic expanse of the water…

Although sometimes, Makoto did lurch with the boat. And while stumbling and trying to catch his balance, there'd be another lurch and his shoe would go flying just as Makoto hit the deck. Literally.

With his body and ego bruised, he had considered just miserably laying there. Then he heard footsteps coming closer and closer and suspecting one of the ship's staff, he hurriedly flailed to push himself up. The last thing he needed was to be dragged down to the ship's medical facility and cause trouble–!

His shoe lightly smacked the top of his head before he could stand or even finish that thought. He had seriously thought he lost that shoe to the ocean.

"It hit me. In the fucking head."

"S-Sorry!" Makoto immediately bowed, hitting the deck again with quite the force to show his remorse. "I'm really, really sorry!"

That low voice let out a loud sigh, rumbling as Makoto's body was shivering.

"...Don't I *know* you?"

With a weak whimper, Makoto raised his head. Even in the darkness, he could make out the person looming over him. With their black hair and sharp blue eyes, this person was…definitely familiar. But it wasn't someone he had actually been terribly acquainted with. This person was…

"M-Matsuda-kun, right?" he asked. "E-Enoshima-san's boyfriend! Is Enoshima-san also…?"

Enoshima-san ***already*** *hates me!*

"What? Who the hell would go out with that fugly chick?" Matsuda scowled even more. "Or was she spewing shit like a toilet again?"

Komaru would know how to respond to this, being so close to Fukawa-san. Makoto, very distressingly, could only shrug.

"Just…childhood friends with her, then?"

"I got on this ship to get away from her, but whatever." Matsuda's narrowed stare became more so, more akin to sharp icy slits than eyes. "Anyway. *You*. The guy who lost his shoe. You're Junko's classmate."

"O-One of them, yes." Makoto nodded quickly, finally remembering to retrieve his shoe from Matsuda's hand. "I'm not surprised you don't know me, I'm…"

"You're Naegi," Matsuda droned, ever so unimpressed. "That's right. Junko's sister is quite the fan."

"Ikusaba-san?" Makoto thought to laugh at what he assumed was a joke, but Matsuda's frosty demeanor discouraged him. "I-I guess we're friends, yeah. I don't think Enoshima-san doesn't like me very much…"

"She doesn't," Matsuda confirmed airily, making him flinch. You should put your shoe back on. You look ridiculous."

"Right… *Right*."

He slipped his shoe sullenly, stamping his foot a few times to make sure it was firm. The glimmer of the moon caught the corner of his gaze, and he was surprised at how late it had gotten. The waters looked almost black, but the ship was still brightly lit like a star. Just a peer through the window would show the bustling and cheerful passengers.

Right. There was still another rock under his feet. His stomach lurched, but the nausea from before had considerably subsided. If he just stayed up here and watched the waves, he would probably be fine…

“Oi.”

Matsuda was suddenly closer than before, steadying him with stern hands on his tense shoulders. The ship shifted, and Makoto would’ve, in fact, toppled over if not for Matsuda’s foresight. Despite that helpful action, Matsuda didn’t look much friendlier, with half his scowling face enveloped in shadow. That narrowed-eyed stare remained, piercing and no-nonsense.

“If you’re feeling *that* shitty,” he said, and even his voice was sharp like a slap. “You should take something. Why would you even *go* onto a cruise if your motion sickness is that bad?”

“I… Komaru wanted to go,” Makoto replied, feeling his cheeks flush. Matsuda’s eye twitched and that must not have been a good answer. “She, uh… We haven’t been able to see each other as much since I started going to Hope’s Peak Academy. I thought this would be fun, but I guess I underestimated my hardiness. Haha. I-I’m sorry, Matsuda-kun.”

“The hell are you apologizing to me for?” Rather than wait for an answer, Matsuda shook his head. “Never mind that. How’s your fluid intake? Have you eaten anything recently? Even just a snack?”

“I haven’t had much of an appetite recently, so…”

“Idiot!”

Makoto flinched like he’d been hit even though it was just a shout. Before he could apologize, Matsuda gripped his arm and started dragging him.

“Come on, idiot.”

“Huh? H-*Huh*?!”

On the ninth floor was the deck. There was a huge pool in the middle that all the kids (and Komaru) loved, although it seemed there were just couples now. The light of the pool was almost ethereal with the display of romance all the more flustering for it.

Like a soldier on a mission, Matsuda marched right past with Makoto in tow. At the front of the deck was the buffet that was still serving dinner. It was sparse due to the hour, but there were still couples—quite a few couples on warm dates.

W-We’re really out of place! Makoto thought, but he felt like even if he voiced that sentiment, he’d get yelled at again. He’d rather not get yelled at where people were present…

Matsuda had already spotted his goal. One of the tables at the very front, standing against the windows to show the very path the ship was taking. The entirety of the ocean the boat was soaring through. It was more surreal than just the waves they were sailing past, and Makoto couldn’t believe that it wasn’t already preoccupied.

It was…*lucky*, he supposed. It’s best that Matsuda not have to chase any less fortunate couples off. Yeah.

“Sit.”

Makoto found himself plopped in the chair, still facing the sea.

“Wait.”

Like a dog, Makoto sat still as Matsuda strode off. He blinked a few times at just the strangeness of this situation. He didn’t have to wait long, but the passing moments still came with countless questions. Before he could piece it all together in a climatic inference, Matsuda returned with a granola bar and a cup of juice.

Hardly the image of decadence, but Makoto was still squirming as the items were slid in front of him. With a meek gratitude, he started sipping at the juice. He could distract himself with the stars once more, except once Matsuda plopped into the seat beside him, it was as if his very nerves were set aflame.

Even the roaring waves did little to douse such a sensation. The only thing louder than his heartbeat was Matsuda’s noisy chewing. Funny how things worked.

There were more reasons to find this situation surreal. The canvas of night that was littered with stars and waves, the low light of the restaurant, and the low tender murmurs of lovers… To think Komaru slept through all this like a corpse.

Makoto…has always liked the night, perhaps in spite of himself. With how his luck could be, there were endless dangers lurking in the darkness. He was too optimistic to fear every shadow, but he still couldn’t help having anxieties about this and that.

He’s anxious right now. He doesn’t fear Matsuda, but he hasn’t a clue what to say to him.

“Ah, the stars are beautiful, aren’t they?” It was the first thing that came to mind. As flustering as it was…

Matsuda just hummed.

“The moon, too.”

“I’ve always liked the stars,” he rambled. “But this makes me feel like I never saw them until now.”

“Lived in the city, then?” Matsuda asked, huffing. “The air’s polluted to shit. And it’s so fucking noisy.”

“Polluted, huh?”

The sky really was so clear from where he sat.

“I’ve never seen so many,” Makoto mused, awestruck by each and every lovely glimmer. “You could make out every constellation. Not that I know much about constellations. I, uh…” Lighting up, he pointed at the brightest one. “I know Polaris!”

“That’s not Polaris.”

“O-Oh.”

“That’s the Beta Ursae Minoris.”

…the ‘idiot’ wasn’t spoken, but it did feel implied.

“Just look a little more upwards, and you’ll find the actual star,” Matsuda said. At Makoto’s shame-flushed face, he just rolled his eyes. He lifted his finger to point. “There. That’s Polaris.”

“I-It’s small,” Makoto remarked, a little surprised.

“Just because it’s the brightest doesn’t mean it’s the biggest,” Matsuda harrumphed, unimpressed. “It’s not a strange concept. People are much the same way. The most remarkable beings can have modest upbringings.”

Matsuda gave him a sharp look, making him flinch. He’s not sure why, but it felt like he was missing something important. He can’t be sure what it is, and the stars didn’t provide him any hints. They kept on twinkling without care, lovely without any effort and so very distant.

Not unlike Ultimates, I suppose.

“Do you like the stars, too, Matsuda-kun?”

“I guess?” Matsuda quirked a brow. “I’ve read a couple of manga about astronomers and other star nuts. I’ve picked up a couple of things.”

“Do you know constellations?” Makoto asked. “I know the Big and Little Dippers, but…”

“Not constellations.”

“Ah, huh?”

“Those aren’t constellations.” Matsuda clicked his tongue. “They’re asterisms. The *actual* constellations are the Ursa Minor and the Ursa Major.”

The *‘idiot’* wasn’t said, but…

“Asterisms are much smaller than constellations. That’s like comparing limbs to bodies. Don’t tell me you think every pattern of stars is a constellation?”

Makoto shut his mouth, but Matsuda’s face still pinched up.

“Ugh. Unbelievable. Listen. Constellations are based on asterisms, but they’re what divide the sky. Whereas asterisms are a more general concept…”

Matsuda went off like that for a while. Someone, who by his own admission had only picked up a couple of things, ended up going on for what felt like hours.Others might suspect that Makoto pissed him off somehow, but…

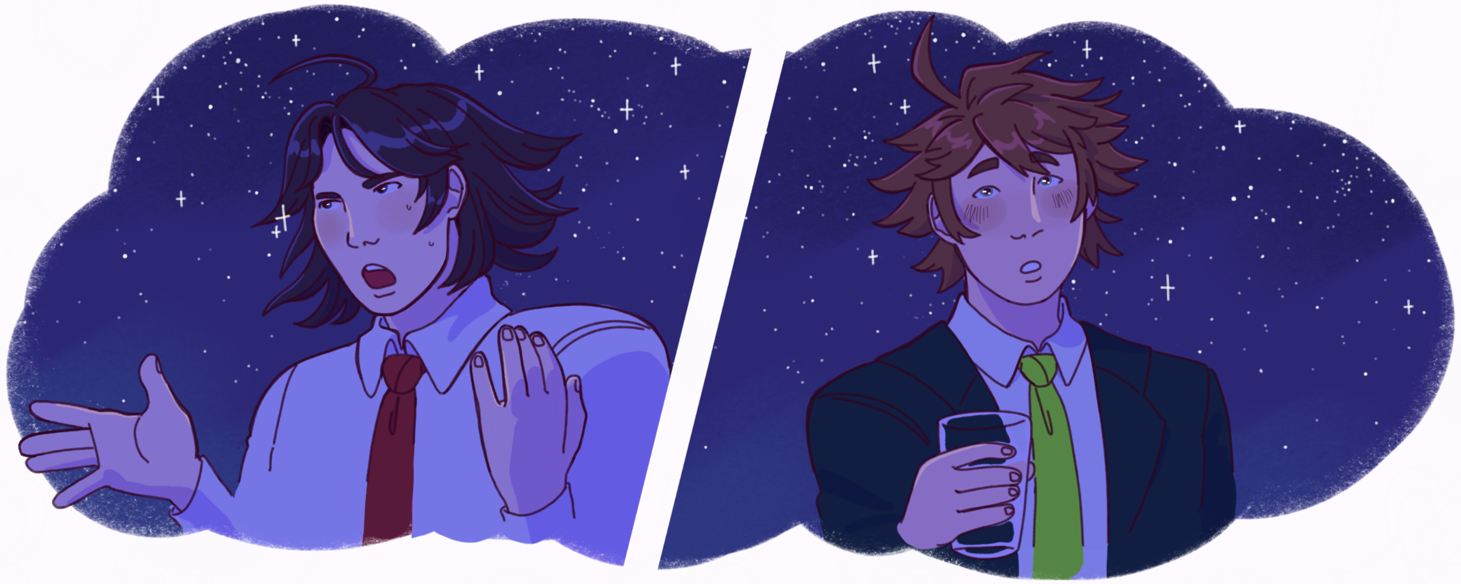
If Makoto didn’t know any better, he’d instead suspect that Matsuda was rambling due to nerves.

What a ridiculous notion.

Still, Matsuda-kun’s rambling…

He couldn’t help but listen intently with a smile as Matsuda ranted about the Summer Triangle. That weirdly intense gleam in his sapphire gaze was not unlike starlight itself.

It’s kind of cute.



Above: @quinnsartbox

“Ah, shit, it’s late.”

He must’ve missed Junko more than he thought if he really rambled like that. How asinine. How many seconds, minutes, or hours did he bitch about nothing? That the lucky kid even stuck around while he cursed out magpies spoke of patience and grace that even the saints couldn’t achieve.

Speaking of the lucky kid. Looked like he conked out. His head was resting upon his folded arms, his breathing steady and soft. Like how kids fall asleep through lectures, that Naegi guy’s exhaustion must have finally kicked in. He would have to help this annoying kid back to his cabin, make sure his seasickness didn’t cause further complications, and then…what, exactly?

“You could invite him to dinner,” a snide voice giggled in the back of his skull.

“Maybe dress a little fancy! He might like it!”

Urgh. As if.

Hoisting Naegi up, he felt his face warm as the kid’s soft cheek went smush against his shoulder. His useless heart skipped a beat, and he would scream if anyone stared at them. What a pair they made on this dumb boat.

Still, as Naegi sighed from the rocking and swaying, Yasuke couldn’t help but glance quickly at the night sky to calm himself down.

“...so stupid.”

Page Prior: @quinnsartbox
Below: @redactedhaunt

Care, Comfort, and Chamomile

By: Soshu

Shuichi scrutinizes the photo through his magnifying glass, searching for clues. His brow furrows in frustration as he continues his search, waiting for the moment realization strikes.

It doesn't happen.

Giving up, he groans, tossing the picture aside onto a growing mountain of evidence. Folders, booklets, and emptied cups of coffee litter every inch of the Ultimate Detective research lab. Photographs and drawings coat the bulletin board to his right, linked by haphazard strands of twine. He turns to them again, carefully scanning their contents - figures and places whose names sit out of reach, distant memories that never emerge from the fog. He spares a glance at the clock ticking quietly atop his desk. Three AM. Well into nighttime.

The moment he grasps the time fatigue hits him like a hammer. A weight sets in on his mind and his vision swims, reducing everything to fuzzy, misshapen blurs. The world warps around him, forcing his eyes shut, and he falls forward, regaining consciousness and bolting back upright at the last minute. Recovering, he wearily rubs his eyes, muttering beneath his breath. He can't afford to sleep. Not now….

A sudden knocking cuts Shuichi's internal crisis short. He jumps in his seat and his heart jitters in shock. "Wh-who's there!?"

"Pardon the intrusion." The door swings open and Kirumi emerges from behind it, a tea tray held firmly in both hands. She scans the room, searching, until her uncovered eye lands on him. "Ah, Shuichi. Working even at this hour, I see."

Shuichi's shoulders sag and he sighs in both relief and annoyance. "Kirumi, I thought I told you I didn't need maid service."

"A maid deals in more than what the client merely *needs*, Shuichi." Her tray lands on a nearby shelf with a soft *clink*.

"I know, but… you have better things to do than wait on me. Shouldn't you… I dunno, be sleeping?" Shuichi tries to smile. "...you get what I mean, right?"

"Of course." Kirumi folds her hands and stands to attention. "So what is troubling you tonight, Shuichi? You appear to be struggling."

Shuichi scoffs. She didn't get it at all. He yawns, rubbing his sore, sleep-deprived eyes. "That's one way of putting it. I don't think I've made any progress in the last hour." He tosses a stack of documents onto his desk, scattering papers every which way. "The Flashback Lights, these photos… There's obviously a connection here, some truth Monokuma wants us to figure out, but I just can't see it."

Kirumi hums in curiosity. "That is indeed concerning…."

"We need to find the mastermind," Shuichi goes on, voice rising to a fervent ramble, "and we can't do that unless we understand our situation. If we're going to get out of here, we have to find the truth. But I *can't*!" Agitated hands roughly ruffle through his hair. "I've been at this so long I can barely think straight…."

Kirumi sighs softly, her face falling. "It is not my place to give orders, but may I suggest that you rest? That *would* be the obvious solution."

"No way. I *have* to solve this case. I can't rest until I do, even if I wanted to… because everyone's life is at stake." Shuichi turns back to his notes and scowls, irritated. "I thought you'd understand that…."

The hint of a grimace tugs at the maid's mouth, but her composure refuses to break. "...I see. Then what is it you want me to do?"

Shuichi lets out a bitter sigh. She clearly has no intention of leaving without her orders. "The longer this mystery goes unsolved, the more we're in danger. There's no other way… I'll have to pull an all-nighter." Not deigning to look at her, he riffs through a folder of evidence. "I'm going to solve this case *tonight*. Do something that can keep me awake until I do." He wobbles in place as he works, nearly falling asleep again. "Please… anything."

Kirumi frowns, clearly disapproving. "That hardly sounds healthy, Shuichi. But if that is your request… then I have no right to refuse." She puts a hand to her mouth, thinking. "Yes… you require an emergency remedy to your fatigue, lest your detective work suffer further. I believe I may have the solution."

Shuichi's pen stops. "Really?" He rubs his eyes and looks up at her. "You do?"

"Yes... a potent, immediate antidote." Kirumi paces around the lab in slow, deliberate circles, thoughtfully stroking her chin. "Tell me, have you ever heard of *Lemimocha* tea?

"Huh?" Shuichi squints at her. "What is that? Did you make that up?"

"It is a special blend from an elite Japanese teahouse, sourced from the most secluded plantations in all of Asia." Kirumi’s circular procession continues. "So powerful is this blend that it cures all forms of tiredness and fatigue... clearing one's mind of negativity and empowering them to do the impossible."

"Really," says Shuichi uncertainly. "Have you… ever had any?"

"No. It is far too valuable to waste on a servant like myself." Kirumi’s pacing halts and her expression turns grim. "It costs a thousand dollars to produce even a single cup."

Shuichi pales. "A *thousand*!?" He chokes at the mere thought of it. “Is that even possible!?”

"The price befits the product… a luxury that only the world’s wealthiest can afford. The exclusive domain of kings and emperors, tycoons and tyrants... until today." Kirumi glances sideways at him, raising a finger to her lips. "You see,” she whispers, “I possess exactly one box of that legendary tea, acquired myself at great expense. I held it in reserve, waiting for the day I found a master truly worthy of it. And I believe… that day has come."

A cold chill sets in. Shuichi coughs and tugs at his collar. "Y-you're joking, right?"

"Have I ever been one to tell jokes?" Kirumi shakes her head. "No, Shuichi. This is the pinnacle of my selfless devotion. The ultimate tea, prepared by the Ultimate Maid." She pivots on her heels to face him, stone-faced and stoic. "Do you understand? This is my best-kept secret. A weapon to annihilate even the most potent of fatigues. In the wrong hands, such power could prove dangerous." A deadly glint shines in her eye. "I offer that power to you. So that you may solve this mystery, and save us all."

Shuichi gulps. “Wh-what…”

“You are the Ultimate Detective. You alone hold the potential to free us from our captivity. This is your finest hour.”

“But…”

“Our lives have been leading up to this moment, Shuichi. Yours, to solve this mystery, and mine, to help my master reach his fullest potential.” She extends a hand to him, voice rising with determination. “Let me lend you my strength. Take this tea, and *solve this case*–”

"I ***can't***!" Shuichi leaps from his seat and his hands hit the desk with a bang.

Kirumi shudders and pulls away, her confidence shattered. “What…?”

"I'm sorry, Kirumi, I know you only want what's best for me, but I can't accept something so precious. I don't deserve that kind of favor." Shuichi sighs bitterly, sinking into his chair. “You’d be better off not wasting your effort.”

Kirumi stares at him, numb and emotionless. "...I see." She turns her back and returns to her tea tray, solemnly rearranging its contents. "I suspected something like this might happen."

"Now you get it," mumbles Shuichi. "So please say you're not going to go make me a cup of thousand-dollar tea."

Kirumi waves a dismissive hand. "No, of course not. That won’t be necessary–"

"Oh, thank God–"

"–because I made a whole pot of it five minutes ago." She turns around and produces a steaming teapot in her hands, beaming with pride. "Steeped to perfection, I assure you."

"You *didn't*!" Shuichi gapes in horror as the teapot lands on his desk. "Kirumi, what have you done!?"

"What any good maid would do." Still smiling, Kirumi produces a teacup and dutifully fills it to the brim. Satisfied, she sets it down right in front of him, leaving him no chance to escape. "There you are. Enjoy."

Shuichi stares at the steaming cup with a tortured grimace. It's no use refusing. The damage is done. His face falls and he anxiously grinds his teeth, afraid that even looking at the tea might somehow ruin it. "I still kind of feel like it'd be wasted on me…."

A gloved hand lands on his head. "Oh, nonsense. If anyone deserves a taste of miracle tea, it's you... our dear Ultimate Detective." Kirumi playfully tousles his hair. "I will not allow anyone to make light of your worth and potential, Shuichi... not even you. You matter far too much for that." She silences the rest of his complaints with a gentle pat to the head. "That aside. I assume you'll be partaking?"

"I don't know about–"

"Wonderful." Kirumi slides the teacup closer, daring him to drink it. "Please, enjoy it to your heart's content." She tilts her head to one side. "Well? Your tea's getting cold."

Shuichi feels one last pang of guilt. But he takes a look into the darkened pool below, seeing his own haggard reflection in its surface, and his opposition crumbles. He sighs one last time in resignation, taking the handle between two fingers and lifting it to his mouth. "Well, here goes nothing...." He takes a slow, apprehensive sip, smacking his lips, then makes a puzzled face and has another taste. "This... seems kind of familiar."

Kirumi nods. "But of course. Its taste, while exotic, contains recognizable elements to soothe the mind." A wistful smile appears. "It tastes of... home, wouldn't you say? Of comfort, care, and love...."

"Not… exactly what I meant." Shuichi takes a third sip, slow and painfully drawn out. "It tastes really, *really* familiar. Like I've had it somewhere before."

Kirumi covers her mouth in surprise. "Really? My, Shuichi, you must keep finer company than I thought."

"No, that's not it either. This tea isn't just familiar, it seems... *ordinary*. Like I've been used to it for a long time. I mean, if I didn't know better, I'd think it was the exact same tea you make for us every night." An awkward pause sets in, broken only by the ticking of his clock. Shuichi sets the cup down and turns to her, eyes narrowed. "...It *is*, isn't it?"

Not a single crack appears in Kirumi’s professional demeanor. "Oh well," she says eventually. *“Busted*, as they say." She bends down and, in one swift motion, lifts him in a perfect bridal carry.

"What the–!?" Shuichi's face bursts into a shade of red he didn't know existed. He kicks his feet uselessly, powerless to escape. "H-hey, what is this? *Put me down!*"

"Your deductions were correct, detective," murmurs Kirumi, ignoring his resistance. "It was indeed a pot of ordinary chamomile. A well-known therapeutic for improving one's sleep."

"Chamomile...?" Shuichi stops flailing just long enough to process. "Wait, *sleep*!? I can't sleep *now*! I have a case to solve! Everyone's counting on-"

"And they can just as well count on you tomorrow." Kirumi tightens her hold on him and turns for the door. "No one does their best work when sleep-deprived."

Shuichi whines in protest. "W-wait! I wasn't finished! I'm almost at a breakthrough, I promise! Just... five more minutes!" He reaches a desperate hand towards his desk, but Kirumi whisks him away and he ends up grabbing at empty space. "At least let me get my notes–"

"I assure you, Shuichi, they’re not going anywhere. And if I set you down for even a moment, I know for a fact you'll go right back to work."

"What? N-no, that's not true! I wouldn't–" Shuichi squirms and bites his tongue. "Okay, maybe you're right…."

"Of course I am." She hoists him higher, bringing his face almost to hers. "Now come along. Let's get you to the dorms."

"Guh..." Shuichi pouts and rubs his sleepy eyes. "This is so embarrassing... what if someone sees us?"

The maid gives him a stern look. "Do you have any idea what hour it is, Shuichi? No sane person should be out this late. That I was here to pry you away from your work is a miracle in itself."

"Some miracle,” sighs Shuichi. "You tricked me…."

"Tricked?" Kirumi's face softens with bemused mirth. "Silly Shuichi," she murmurs, "surely you knew no such miracle tea exists? Fatigue is not that easy to conquer, I'm afraid."

Shuichi groans, hiding his face. "I don't believe this. I'm supposed to be a detective and I fell for such an obvious lie...."

"'Lie' is such a strong word." Kirumi stops walking and the hint of a blush appears on her cheeks. "No... it was not a complete lie. My most exclusive service is indeed real, but it has a different secret from the one I told you. Something so powerful and rare that no amount of money could buy it…." Her eyes fall shut and she bows her head, planting a gentle kiss to his forehead. “Do you understand?”

Shuichi freezes. “Huh…?” His face colors and flustered, malformed syllables spill from his lips. “Kirumi, you… I… *huh*?”

Even the stoic Ultimate Maid fails to contain a giggle. “Oh, how cute. Did I surprise you?”

Shuichi squirms, still blushing. “But… why?”

“Why?” Kirumi shakes her head. “Shuichi, I once told you that I felt something within you… but I was not just referring to your potential. You’re… important to me.” She tightens her grip on his shoulder, holding his body closer. “You matter more than you could ever know. You show such kindness to those around you and work so hard for our sake, yet you never spare a thought for yourself…. While selflessness is a virtue, you are being reckless. To see you work yourself to death would simply break my heart.” She lowers her head and emits a forlorn sigh. “You told me once that you saw me as an equal. If to you I am more than a simple maid, then let me treat you as more than a mere detective. Your life, Shuichi, is more important than your case.”

“Kirumi….” Shuichi falls silent. He raises his hands, wavering, before throwing his arms around her shoulders and pulling her into a hug.

Kirumi’s eyes widen. “Oh…?” She blinks, taken aback by the gesture. “Is… something the matter?”

“No, it’s just…” Shuichi tightens the hug, hiding his face in the crook of her neck. “...Thank you. For caring about me. If I’d stayed there all night on my own, who knows what could’ve happened….”

Kirumi breathes a little sigh of relief. “No need to thank me. Your safety is the only reward I need.” She smiles and brushes against him in a little affectionate nuzzle. “Well. Let’s get you to bed, shall we?”

Shuichi’s limbs go slack, his drowsiness finally overtaking him. “...Yeah,” he mumbles, safe in Kirumi’s warm, protective embrace. “I’d love that.”

The Seaside Show

By: BurningFox6

All good things must come to an end. That included tropical trips with your girlfriend.

When they'd first started dating, Mahiru could barely get Himiko out of the house, let alone out on vacation. Heck, even now the mage still preferred a comfy night at home to a night on the town. Yet here they were, sharing a rented beach house on the tail-end of a couple of lovely weeks spent somewhere in the Bahamas.

When they'd first started dating during their time in Hope's Peak, something this fancy was only a far-off dream. Would they mesh? Would they last? Would they ever manage to get Himiko off her lazy butt? But as they'd studied together, grew closer, eventually graduated and moved in together, they'd turned out to be pretty good influences on each other. Mahiru's stern but caring guidance helped her girlfriend learn to express herself better, encouraged her to pick up healthier habits and bolster her ener-... mana. In exchange, Himiko showed her how to relax a little, to view the world through a lens that wasn't her camera's and to see just how magical everything could be with a little imagination.

They were still going strong. Stronger than ever, even. And they'd celebrated with an unforgettable expedition.

It'd been paradise.

On top of the local cuisine and activities, there were plenty of beautiful tropical vistas around... and Mahiru made sure to capture as many as she could on film. Some habits died hard, especially since she made a living off her photography now. They'd have plenty of pictures to look back fondly on later if it killed her.

Time on the beach, shopping from local merchants, riding across crystal clear waves on a boat, and some of the most delicious food they'd ever had. Even without Mahiru's help, it was an unforgettable trip.

But they were going home tomorrow. They had lives to get back to, and a cat that must be driving its sitter crazy by now.

On the night of the final day, Mahiru reclined in one of the chairs in their bedroom, scrolling through the photos in her digital camera. It was conflicting, not wanting to leave, yet at the same time being excited to get home and develop these. She'd always preferred tangible photos to data... it made them feel more real, more permanent. And she definitely wanted to keep the memories they'd made on the trip forever, in a scrapbook.

Behind her, she heard the door click open, knowing full well who it was. She smiled to herself, feigning ignorance up until she felt a slim pair of arms drape around her shoulders. "What're you doing?" Himiko asked, savoring the rare occasion to feel tall by resting her chin atop Mahiru's head while she sat.

"Reminiscing." Mahiru lifted the camera up to show her the screen. "We definitely need to pin a few of these up back home."

Himiko hummed her agreement, reaching out to swipe her finger across the screen. "This one was fun," she said, landing on a picture of the two making friends with an inquisitive turtle. "Perfect pictures, as always."

"Thanks." Mahiru never got tired of Himiko praising her work. Still, she sighed, knowing that these rare moments ended here. "It's a shame we need to head back already."

Even with Himiko's renewed pep, she was still far from the most energetic person. It was usually up to Mahiru to plan their escapades, which is why it came as a surprise when she murmured one last suggestion in her ear.

"Well... we're still here until tomorrow, aren't we?" Himiko pointed out. "We could head down to the beach one more time. Have one last swim before we gotta leave."

"This late?"

"Why not? It's only a short walk away. I could even teleport us there."

Mahiru smirked, long used to her girlfriend's sorcerous claims by now. "Conserve your mana. Go on ahead without me, I'll join you after I change."

"Nyeh... that's okay. Take your time. I'll be there when you're ready. Meet me at that special spot we found a couple days ago." Planting a kiss on her cheek, Himiko let go and jogged out of the room.

Not just making the plans, but running off ahead without her? ...Heck, running, period? Her girlfriend was acting weird.

Now that she thought of it, Himiko wasn't fond of the ocean, either. She typically didn't wade out too far into the water when they visited the beach. And now she was suggesting a swim? Something was up.

Her curiosity peaked, Mahiru changed into her favorite blue polka dot bikini, packed a few things into her camera case, and set off after her a few moments later.

Mahiru made her way along the path to the shore, the waves gently lapping at the sands under the moonlight. She traced the route along the beach they'd charted in their minds earlier, the one leading up to a scenic and secluded cove farther up the coast.

A nice private place for the two to spend their beach time, and for Mahiru to snag some particularly dazzling photos. As promised, Himiko was waiting for her at the water's edge, having already laid out a towel for them.

Something was off, though. Himiko had changed, too, but into more than just a swimsuit.

The girl had thrown her mage's hat on, a dark cape wrapped around her brown swimsuit. Her usual accessories for when she put on performances. Wondering just what she was up to, Mahiru approached. "What's with the get-up?" she called to her.

Himiko glanced her way, waving warmly. "Ah... the guest of honor is here. I conjured a seat for you~."

She gestured to the towel and Mahiru chuckled, playing along and sitting down. "What's this about?" she asked, looking up at her.

In response, Himiko opened her cape, throwing out her arms. Nothing up her sleeves... because she didn't have any. "A private magic show, just for you. I figured it'd be a nice way to end the trip, right?"

A twinkle gleamed in Mahiru's eye. She'd been to many of her girlfriend's performances, and Himiko wasn't shy about pulling off random tricks in their day-to-day life. But a special display, just for her, in such a beautiful place? A nice way to end the trip, indeed.

"I'm honored," she replied truthfully, bringing her knees up to her chest. "So what've you got for me?"

Himiko grinned, turning to the ocean. "If I had the energy right now, I'd part the waves for you." Suddenly, she swished around, a bouquet of tropical hibiscuses in hand. "Nyeh... I guess you'll have to settle for these."

Mahiru gasped. Where had they come from? They'd been dating for years and she still couldn't get Himiko to disclose her magical secrets... the one hidden thing between them. It left her boggled more often than not, but it made moments like this all the more magical. "How'd you do that?" she asked, accepting them with a grateful grin.

"You know I can't tell you," Himiko replied. "But there's more where that came from. For my next spell..."

The show continued, and Himiko didn't hold back. She used every trick in her repertoire, from filling the sky with fireworks to summoning seashells and seagulls from her hat. Even more mundane things, like card tricks, which still impressed and amazed Mahiru every time she bamboozled her girlfriend or predicted the impossible. Himiko

got a laugh out of her when she tore a King of Spades to shreds... yet somehow brought it back, but with a fish head.

Mahiru's applause echoed across the cove again and again, her flowers seated on the towel beside her. She wasn't sure how much time passed - minutes, hours? It was hard to keep track when every moment was full of wonder.

At last, though, it was time for the finale. "And for my final act... something tried and true." She stepped closer, once more showing off her bare arms with a flick of the wrist. "I think there's something behind your ear."

Mahiru giggled. A rather simple trick to close things out, but knowing her girlfriend's talent, she'd find a way to make it amazing. "Oh? What is it?"

Himiko knelt down before her, letting her hand glide across her cheek before reaching behind Mahiru's head. "Onnnne second..." She made a show of taking her time, fumbling around behind her, even scrunching up her face in concentration. Eventually, she finally reeled her hand back with something clutched inside. "This."

Mahiru hadn't been wrong. Himiko had definitely, absolutely made it amazing.

It was a little clam, nothing too special... until she opened it up to show the treasure within. A pearl ring, shining in the shell, so small and yet truly her most powerful spell yet.

It was at that moment Mahiru realized Himiko had knelt down for the trick, and was still kneeling.

The implication hit, and it hit hard. Mahiru pressed a hand to her mouth, pointing down at the engagement band. "Is this...?"

Himiko nodded, a hopeful look on her face. "It's my job to use my magic to make people smile... but yours is my favorite one. I wanna see it every day." She bowed her head a bit, shyly peering from under the brim of her hat. "So... if you'd let me... I want the chance to find ways to make you smile for the rest of your life."

Mahiru stared in stunned silence. But when she finally broke it, it wasn't the response Himiko had hoped for.

She laughed. Loud and hard.

The mage instantly deflated, her bravado evaporating. "Oh..."

"No, no, no! Don't you dare misinterpret me!" Mahiru's giggles died down as she wiped her eye. "It's just... well... one second."

She reached into her camera carrying case, digging for something she'd stashed away in it just before she'd left the bungalow. She held it up for Himiko to see... revealing a ring of her own. She'd been beaten to the punch.

When it clicked, Himiko was laughing too. "Did we just...?"

"Yeah." Mahiru blushed, tucking some hair behind her ear. "Though my proposal wouldn't have been nearly as flashy. I'm kind of glad you did it first..."

"It would've been perfect," Himiko assured her. And she was telling the truth.

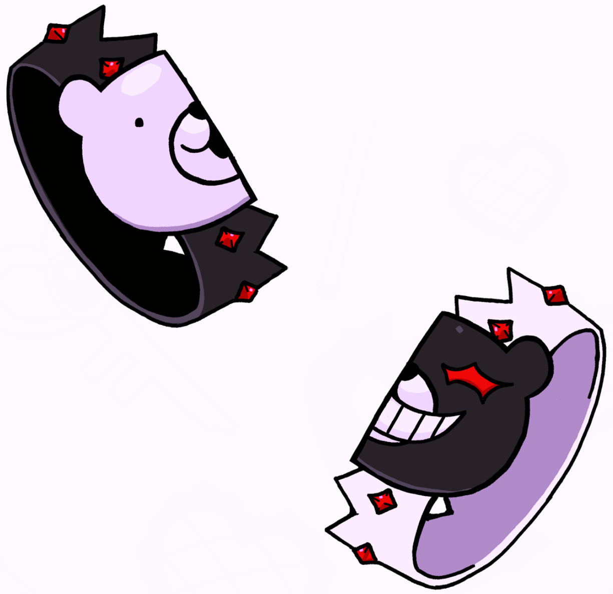
The two sat in silence a moment, the only sound being the gentle caw of seabirds urging them on. "So... does this mean...?" Himiko pried.

"Yeah." Mahiru gave her the warmest, most sincere smile of her life. "I'll marry you. And I think it's safe to assume you'll accept my ring, too..."

"Without a doubt!" Himiko took a mental snapshot of Mahiru's grin. She'd cherish that image forever. Wordlessly, she plucked her own band from its clammy confines and held it out.

Mahiru let her slide it onto her finger, and returned the favor a second later. But rather than just slip it on and be done with it, she held onto her hand, pulling her in. The two shared one more loving smile and a knowing glance before their lips met, starting the new chapter of their lives with a kiss.

As it turned out, some good things COULD last forever.



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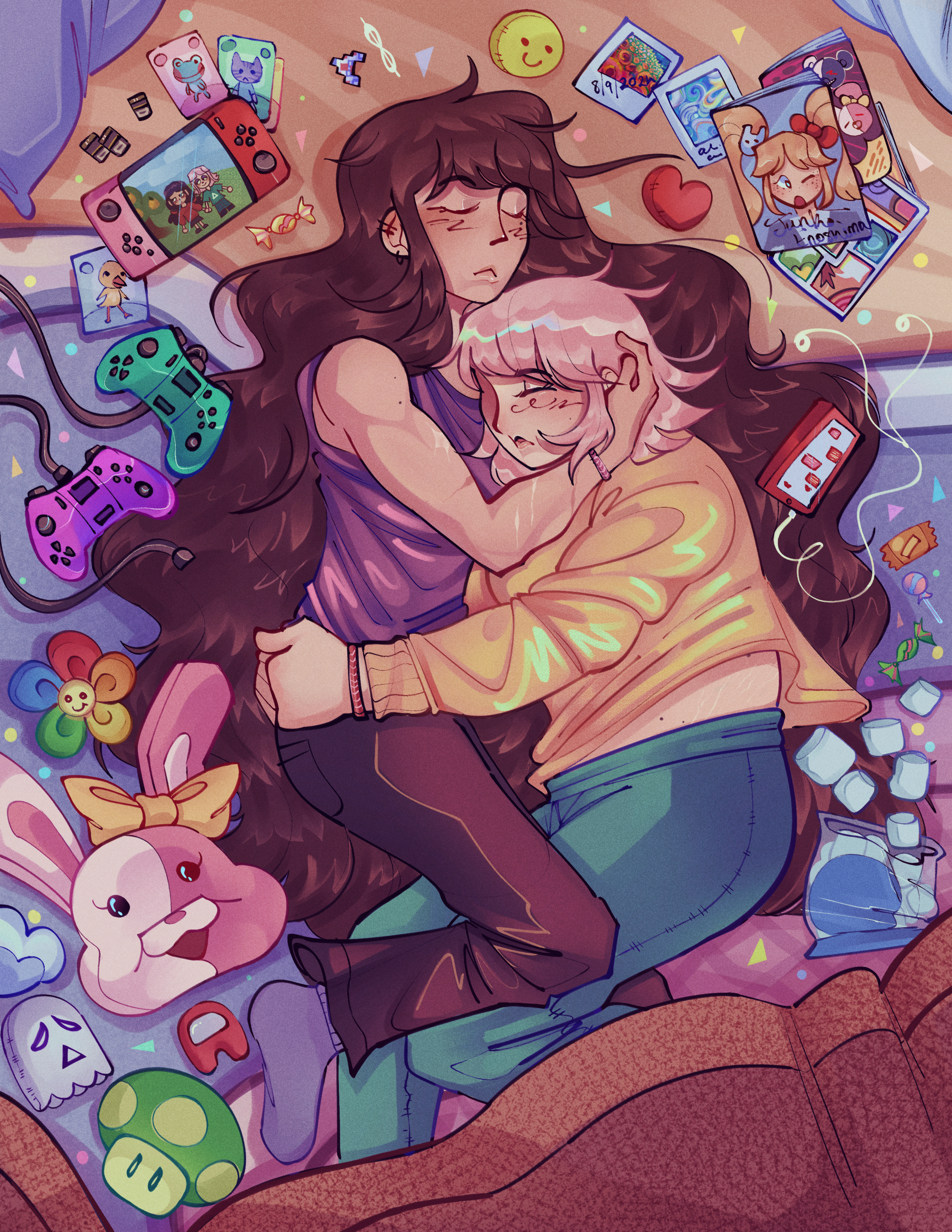

8/9/2024
ai
Junko Enoshima

Beneath a Willow Tree

By: Minish0ck

Touko really, *really* wished that Junko had a better sense of time.

She had been sitting out in the snow for a while now, kept warm only by her mittens and the earmuffs Makoto had gifted her. He sat beside her wrapped in a thick, cream scarf that concealed the majority of his face. A few times, he'd offered it to her, but she'd been adamant in letting him keep it. She wasn't sure if someone of his small size would be able to take the cold for that long.

Junko had said that she'd arrive at 12pm exactly. Thirty minutes later, she had called and said that she'd be there soon. Twelve minutes after *that*, she rang up again and explained that she'd spent the whole time trying to find Mahiru before discovering that she was already on her way to the main venue. It wasn't the best excuse, but she let it pass.

In her satchel, a familiar ringtone sang out to tell her who was calling. She sighed.

"Enoshima-san, can you *h-hurry up*? I'm d-dying out here." To her side, Makoto was already preparing to offer her his scarf. She patted his hand away, but she didn't protest to him shuffling closer and grabbing her free hand. Her cheeks warmed.

"Ugh, quit whining! I'm, like, just around the corner, so *chill*." There was a pause. "Pun intended. I'm so funny, aren't I? Hahaha-"

Touko cut the phone.

Less than a minute after, a blonde idol strutted into the park, attracting unknown gazes and evoking secret whispers. With a natural elegance to each step, she made flawless tracks in the snow, unbothered by the two shopping bags hanging like ornaments from either arm. She beamed at Touko and Makoto with a golden grin and baby blue irises that became bolder in the rolling blankets of white. "Tou-chan! Makoto-kun! Your ride has arrived!"

"Don't call me that," she grumbled.

"But doesn't Makoto-kun call you that all the time, Tou-chan?"

Her cheeks took a bright shade of red that definitely wasn't induced by the temperature. "Gh- Well- I prefer h-him over you.."

Junko hummed. "Mkay! Anyways, let's *go* already! I've got a flight to Hawaii at four, so let's make this shoot a quickie."

"But.. it's not even that far into the afternoon. Photoshoots are quick anyways, aren't they?"

"It depends," she answered, swaying on the spot. Her white snow boots crunched under her as she walked, and behind her, her companions followed wordlessly. "If you're with an experienced model - like *moi* - then they'll know what to do, and it should go.. pretty smoothly. If the photographer is good too, then it'll be short and sweet! A bit like you, Tou-chan, but excluding the sweet part."

"Enoshima-san.."

"Sheesh, relax. Since you two lovebirds have never done this before, it'll take a bit of guidance from the best model in Japan - Junko Enoshima! Koi-chan's a great photographer, though, so there's no issue there."

There was an unwelcome silence. Neither Touko or Makoto spoke to her very often, and whenever the former did, the conversation ended in an argument. The latter just found her to be rather intimidating.

However, Touko had recently been washed over in an amazing wave of confidence. She suspected that some of her boyfriend's personality was finally rubbing off on her. She gestured to the bundles hanging from Junko's arms and hesitantly asked, "W-What.. what have y-you got in the-the bags?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm glad you asked! You see, these are your clothes for the shoot! *Really* cute, trust me. You can get changed when we get there." As she led them out of the park, the vehicle in question entered their view - a slim, black limousine. She couldn't help but grin at their reactions. "Yes, we're going in a limo. Less gawking and more walking, losers! Get in!"

The journey wasn't as eventful as anyone thought a ride with Junko Enoshima would be - although, her consistent staring at Touko's reddened nose and the subsequent reaction was enough entertainment for the time. By the time they'd arrived at the site, the two were bickering about the colour of Junko's lipstick (which, for your information, was a glossy shade of magenta - *not* fuschia) while Makoto tried to play peacemaker.

"Guys, the car stopped ages ago! We can save the colour debate for later-"

"No, we won't! We're finishing the debate now because I'm right!"

"You're *w-wrong*! T-That's *fuschia*!"

"It's *magenta*! Did you do my makeup this morning? No! So of *course* I know what colour my lipstick is, and it's *magenta*!"

"It i-is *not*!"

"Yes, it *is*!"

A familiar redhead rapped on the car window. It rolled down, courtesy to the driver, and she observed the scene with eyes that strongly reminded Touko of olives. Around her neck, a camera hung. She frowned. "Why have you guys just been sitting around for so long?"

When nobody offered an answer, Makoto offered a question instead. "Um.. How long, exactly?"

"Fifteen minutes. I've been waiting, you know!"

"Ah, I'm sorry about that!" He was the first to clamber out, rushing to introduce himself. "I'm-" His foot slipped, and he fell face-first into the snow.

There was a moment of silence for his embarrassing introduction.

Junko and Touko trailed after him with notable care. While the latter helped the luckster up, the former took the liberty of introducing the trio. "Hey, Koi-chaaan! It's intro time, isn't it? Okay, so, like, she's Touko Fukawa, the novelist famous for making girls wish they had proper love lives," she announced, gesturing to the braided girl crouched on the ground, "and the guy who just ate dirt - or snow, I guess - is Makoto Naegi. He's our lucky student!"

Mahiru's gaze drifted from Junko, to Makoto, who was finally standing, and back to Junko. "Alright, then. Hurry up, everyone. I've already spent an hour freezing out here, so I'd like to make this quick." She waved an inviting hand and led the way up the hill, stopping beneath a particularly large willow tree.

The group looked up at it's drooped branches, white with snow and frost. Draped across them intricately in uniform lines were the small, tear-shaped leaves, low and melancholy. It's form crowned the hill and far overshadowed the skinny trees dotted about. A bench, old, used, yet charming, was nestled in place beneath the giant's weeping arms.

"This is the- *wait a minute*." Everyone watched as the photographer settled her gaze on a child, cozily seated on the bench ahead of them. Clearly, she had imagined it in the photoshoot. She shook her head. "We can go behind the tree instead-"

"No, no, I've got this," Junko interjected. Her boots led her over to the young girl, and after some inaudible chit-chat, she reached into her pocket and handed the girl something papery. Immediately after, she bowed and left. "All done, guys!"

"Wow! You're really good at negotiating, Enoshima-san." Makoto allowed his senior to pull him towards the bench and sit him down, shifting his arms and legs and head until she was satisfied.

"Thank you!"

Touko let her eyes fall upon her classmate's pocket. She whispered, "You paid her, didn't y-you?"

"One thousand yen."

Mahiru frowned as she stood him up again, turning him and stepping back. She muttered something about loosening up and natural positioning - Touko didn't really catch it, but it made Makoto do his iconic nervous chuckle and grin.

The camera clicked.

Everyone fell to silence as their senior inspected her photograph, awaiting her divine judgement. She squinted. Stared. Finally, she spoke. "It looks… awkward." The boy in front of her flushed and shuffled on the spot. "Let's take another one, okay? And try not to be so tense. This isn't a mugshot, you know."

"Heh, sorry about that. It's just my first time doing one of these things." His fingers reached for the fluffy baubles hanging from the coat's bunny-shaped hood, but Junko swatted at him and his hands dropped. He tucked them into the cream pockets of the thick winter coat that encompassed his form, feeling them disappear into it's soft wool.

"How about we try taking a few of Fukawa-san for now?"

The girl in question opened her mouth to protest, but paused as her boyfriend looked at her. She stared back, expecting him to encourage her or *something* like he usually did. He shrugged. His personal way of saying, 'it's your choice.' If she didn't want to do it, he would take her place. However..

She brought a braid over her shoulder and ran her thumb over it, feeling the pink ribbon that she had braided into it. A gift, from him to her. It was her first time wearing it. Her eyes flickered up, and she murmured, "Whatever." It was better than insulting herself, or worse, insulting Mahiru.

Smiling, the photographer tucked a stray hair into her bobble hat and said, "Alright! Let's do this. Just make sure to relax."

Junko settled herself onto the snow and yelled, "Don't worry, Koi-chan! This'll be quick work for you! Easy as pie!"

◆

Mahiru Koizumi had never had a harder time taking a photo. She had taken wedding photos, graduation photos, even underwater photoshoots. All of them came to her with a natural ease, and within a few seconds, the camera would click and she'd be done.

But for some reason that she couldn't explain, this particular photoshoot was proving a massive challenge.

She'd tried shooting them separately - which felt surpisingly empty every time - and tried shooting them together - but the scene never felt natural. It didn't feel *right*. Yes, she was the Ultimate Photographer, but it was a talent that wasn't fully in her control. Each photo depended on her and the subjects, and right now, it felt like she was doing all the work.

She looked up at her three companions. Junko leaned against the tree, watching her classmates. They had grown bored enough to start making tiny snowmen that their blonde friend didn't hesitate to punt into oblivion every time they looked away. Touko looked to be working on something that looked like a small rabbit - she cradled it in her palms with pride, presenting it to Makoto, who beamed at her in return.

The photo process was like a reflex to her. If she saw something that looked immersive, pleasing, sweet - anything that caught her eye - her hands made quick work out of capturing the moment in her camera. Sometimes, it happened so fast that she didn't even notice. Like now, for instance.

It was.. good. As per usual. She'd never taken a bad photo in her life. The quality wasn't the problem. She didn't know what was, though, and that posed a bigger issue. Every single time the camera clicked, and the colorful pixels formed the image, something bugged her. The composition. The pose. *An oddly placed leaf.* She'd been doing this for an hour, and hadn't produced a single photo that she was happy with.

She was so, so tired. Her tool lay dormant in her hands, waiting to be used. It would be, but she felt that anything it captured wouldn't please her.

Giving in to the urge to take a break, Mahiru trudged across to her juniors and knelt down among the gathering of snowy creations. Despite the biting cold, it was quite cozy - everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"So," she started, beginning to work on a snowball, "how many have you made so far?"

Touko sniffled, adjusting her thick hood. Fluffy lops with pink ribbons tied to them hung from each side. She looked like a rabbit, red nose and all. "Six." Carefully, she nestled two miniature leaves into the head of another lump of snow. She'd already given it tiny black eyes and a small snout.

"In total, or…?"

"Six *survivors*," Makoto replied, looking up at Junko. She only grinned back before taking a swig out of her glittery flask. "You've probably seen her kicking them, huh?"

She nodded before setting down her first snowball and starting on another.

"O-Originally, there we-were sixteen." When Mahiru looked over, the writer had

added a little paper tail to her sculpture. It was a fox, she realised, as she set it down amongst the rest of her work. Her gaze lingered elsewhere for a brief moment before flickering back down to her hands.

"Well, it's not *my* fault that you made them so obliterate-able!"

Touko immediately stated, "That's not a word," ignoring the muttered 'book nerd' from beneath the fashionista's breath.

The photographer had finished her second snowball. She stacked the smaller one on top of the bigger one, gave it two little eyes and carved it a smile with a nearby twig. It was wobbly, but sweet.

On her left, the lucky student finished his own little rabbit, crumbly and awkward. It resembled misshapen mochi more than anything, but still looked good. Smiling, he sat it next to his girlfriend's more polished product. The pair looked odd together, but truthfully, rather cute. He sipped his drink and set it back in the snow before adjusting his scarf, failing to notice the braided girl eyeing his flask.

Everyone occupied themselves with the snow (although Junko only kicked at it), pausing for small conversations and quiet admiration. It was a tranquil pastime, Mahiru realised, and a lovely scene. Maybe she could invite the other girls to join her next week.

Snowflake clusters daintily made their way down from the white sky, following the wind, settling on everything around. The breeze was a soft one, and the cold wasn't as harsh as it was before.

She let out a satisfied sigh before capturing the landscape in a single shutter of her camera. Pristine, rolling layers of white, trees dotted around, the bird on the dead branch.. she was glad that she was talented.

Another sniffle from Touko caught her attention. Seemingly, she had grown tired of modelling the snow, and had moved to stare off into the distance. However, it looked like 'the distance' was actually Makoto's drink flask.

It was actually rather amusing to watch. She'd take a glance at it, and before he could look at her, she'd snap back to boring her eyes into an unfortunate passerby. It didn't take long before he took notice too, though, and by then, it'd become a silent staring game.

Dusty pink eyes flipped back over to the green flask in mittened hands, observing, before being met by eager matcha green ones. They stayed like that for a second before breaking apart with nervous smiles and low chuckles.

"You know you can have it, right? I don't mind."

She nodded, adjusted her glasses, and turned away. Then she snatched it away, murmuring a soft ‘thanks’ beneath her breath. Having heard it, his beaming grin grew wider, only prompting Touko’s cheeks to redden.

Mahiru watched her take it to her lips and sip, watched as her shoulders finally relaxed and she let out a satisfied hum. From where she sat, she could see the steam coming from the drink - in fact, she could smell the cinnamon and the cream.

“It’s- It’s.. too sweet.”

“Hm? Oh, I thought you liked it. Here, I’ll take it off your hands- Wait, wait! Why are you still drinking it if you don’t like it?!”

After letting half of it disappear down her throat, she smiled and said, “When d-did I say that?”

“I-” He paused. Thought for a moment. “Ah. Mm.”

Mahiru’s finger twitched.

“Look, I p-promise to take you to that cafe that you’ve always wanted to visit *i-if* you let me have this.”

At this, he perked up, his movements almost too childlike for his age. “The cat cafe! Really?”

“Yes. I’ve b-been meaning to check it o-out, anyways.” Her glossed lips curved upwards, and her cheeks warmed as she mumbled something about a ruined surprise date.

“It’s all yours! Thank you, Tou-chan!” He pressed his lips to her cheek and pulled her in for a cuddle. To Mahiru’s slight surprise, she hugged back, positively glowing.

She let out a soft, “You’re welcome,” beneath her warm breath.

The camera clicked.

With the atmosphere broken by the sudden snap, all eyes turned to her, either dumbfounded or confused. She scanned over the image with hopeful eyes, and finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ve got the picture!” She, indeed, did have the picture, in perfectly sharp colour on a sleek screen. The poses? Natural. The lighting? Soft and ambient. Everything surrounding them was a cherry on top - especially the little army of snowmen. She saw a soft-hearted girl in her snow-rabbit cloak, complemented by an open-hearted boy in his bunny-hood coat.

Adorable.

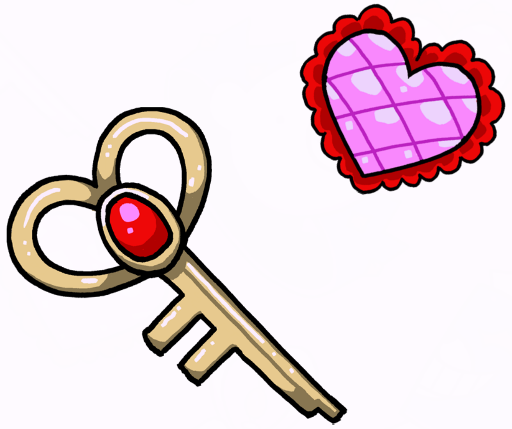
“Oh my *gosh*, that’s *soooo* cute! Look at them in my outfits!” Junko leaned over her, only to swoon at the captured scene and yell, “We’ve got our front cover, lovebirds!”

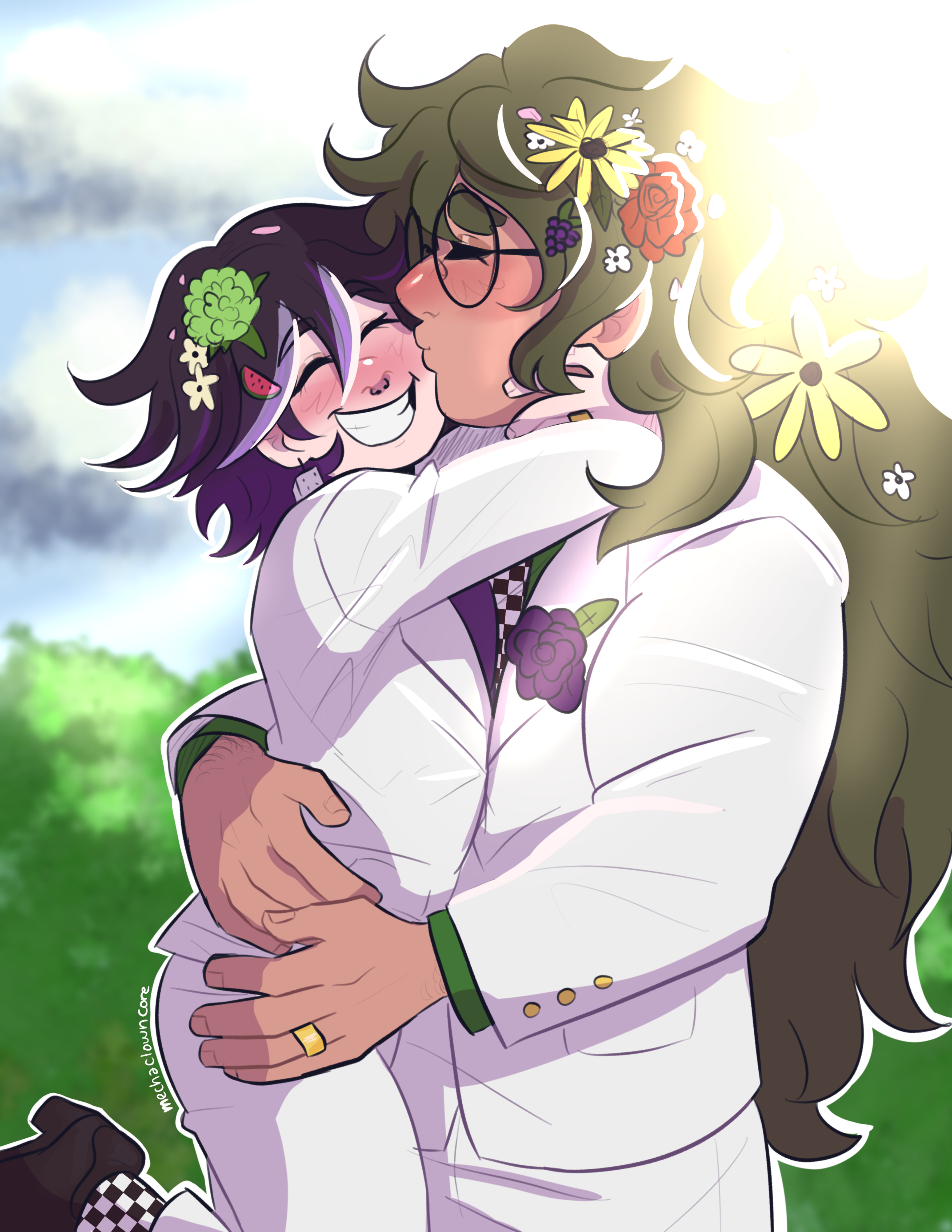
The couple in question snapped out of their stupor to get a good look at Mahiru’s photograph. They looked at each other, smiled, and both said at the same time, “Cool!” Cue the awkward blushing afterwards.

Mahiru looked at her photo again. She drank in the tranquility of it - the gentle love that seeped from it. A perfect moment captured in time. Even though the clothes were the pinnacle, the full image still touched her heart.

She smiled at her work.

She loved being a photographer.




mechaclowncore

Justice Served

By: Seasondeer

Shuichi stood against the wall of the country club's reception room, as far out of the way as humanly possible. He was fidgeting with the inside of his deep blue tracksuit's sleeve. It was about all he could manage at the moment.

The fabric was slick and itchy. He hated tracksuits, and these thin, black athletic shorts he was wearing too. But that didn't seem to matter. He was stuck with them, stuck with this room, and stuck with this country.

Shuichi's parents were rich actors working in America, but he didn't live with them. They'd flown him out to Los Angeles for the weekend. First class flight. They even paid for a chauffeur to pick him up from the airport.

They weren't awful people, his parents. His dad had paid for him to have access to the whole country club and private lessons in whatever sport he felt like playing. He didn't play any sports though. His mother had bought him all the clothes he would need to enjoy his time here. But all of it was too big. They'd booked a dinner reservation for the three of them this evening. But, since they hadn't bothered to reschedule their couples' massages, Shuichi was to spend all afternoon alone at the richest country club in Los Angeles.

He was looking for the least awful option from a list of lessons when an attendant walked up to him. She was speaking some wordy, strange English.

Shuichi's English wasn't even that bad, but he'd been studying United Kingdom English before this trip. Between his discomfort, her accent, and the fast, fluent speech, his brain was completely broken.

She was offering a tray of drinks. Shuichi had no idea what any of them were, except for the water, so he took it, mumbling out a "thank you." She asked him something else, but again, he couldn't follow it. He tried an "I'm fine, thank you," but she didn't seem satisfied with that. She had just started another long, incomprehensible sentence when Shuichi's attention was snatched away by another voice.

"When are you going to show us how you do your COOL Drive, Hoshi-kun?" The voice was speaking Japanese.

Shuichi looked over the attendant's shoulder to see a group of seven teenage boys walking through reception. Everything they wore was blue and white: caps, polos, shorts, sweatbands, and tennis rackets. They must have been a sports team.

The shortest boy answered back, over his shoulder. "When you can handle it. I'd pick up the pace in practice though, or we'll be on next year's American tour before that happens." His response earned a groan from the other boys.

This guy couldn't have been more than 105 centimeters, but his voice was deep, and it bounced off the glossy stone walls. The small bits of short hair peeking out from beneath his cap were a fiery burnt orange. The tennis racket hanging from his exposed wrist had a nonchalance about it that was too perfect to be an accident. His hands never left his pockets. Shuichi thought he might have imagined it, but it almost looked like the boy had glanced his way.

The attendant broke Shuichi's line of sight as she swayed in front of him, asking another question he barely registered. He spoke up in hesitating Japanese. "I'm so sorry, I-I don't know what you're asking me," and then in English, "I am okay. I don't need anything, thank you."

"She wants to see your visitor badge." More Japanese. Shuichi looked down, and the tennis boy was standing next to him.

"Oh, okay," Shuichi said in Japanese, before fumbling in his pocket and pulling out his pass. The attendant thanked him and wandered away, relief and annoyance on her face.

"You might wanna keep that where people can see it. They like to bother people they don't think should be here." This tennis guy spoke like he had nowhere to be. Shuichi looked around for the rest of his entourage, but they were gone.

"Thanks for the assist. I sort of blanked on what she was saying."

The other boy nodded. "Happens. You'll snap out of the classroom mindset in a few days. It'll be easier to keep up once you start thinking on your feet. That's how it was for me, anyway." Shuichi nodded back. He wasn't sure why this guy didn't seem in a hurry.

"I, uh, I think your friends left without you."

"Yeah, I told 'em to go on ahead. I usually end up going back for extra practice anyway. They'd rather put their feet up." He huffed, amused and indignant. "And they wonder why I call them slackers."

Shuichi chuckled along. He wasn't sure what else to do.

"So are you waiting for someone before you go in or–" the boy asked.

"No, just stalling, to be honest. I don't really know what I'm doing here."

"You're a regular fish outta water, huh kid? I can show you around, if you want."

"Oh, uh, okay," Shuichi stuttered out. "That seems like a lot to ask of a stranger, though."

"Well, you didn't ask. Besides, it wouldn't be cool to just leave you here, fidgeting."

Something in him stirred. This guy was very blunt, but he read people just as well as Shuichi did. "I'm sure I'd have figured something out eventually. But alright. Oh, and I'm Shuichi Saihara."

"Ryoma Hoshi. Welcome to paradise. It's the worst."

◆

The inside of the club was lavish, polished, and categorically unfriendly. Ryoma was very thorough in his tour of each facility. And everywhere he and Shuichi went, people looked them up and down or side-eyed them as they passed. This place seemed to have an endless supply of almost identical patrons, wearing pressed polos and expensive watches or jewelry. Supposedly, Shuichi's clothes from his mother were expensive, but he still felt shabby and underdressed.

"–and down that way and to the left is the basketball courts. Barely anyone here uses 'em, but don't think that makes it quiet in there. Lots of squeaking, trust me."

Shuichi cut in. "Is the club always like this?"

Ryoma didn't even look back, but Shuichi could hear the smile in his scoff. "What, covered in expensive landscaping? Or full of snooty rich people?"

"The second one."

"Every day, without fail. You'll have a better time just ignoring them and focusing on the sports. That's what I do." He tossed Shuichi a knowing look over his shoulder. "Though I guess you'd have to actually want to play sports for that to work."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"See anything that catches your interest?"

"Not…really? I don't really know how to play any of these sports."

Ryoma smirked in a way that told Shuichi this was exactly what he'd been hoping for. "Hmph, thought you might say that. That's why I left tennis for last. Come on."

◆

"That wasn't too bad. You almost got it."

"Ryoma, I hit the net."

Ryoma threw a thumbs up at Shuichi that might have meant encouragement but certainly also meant sympathy. "You sure did, but you're getting better from when we started."

Shuichi chuckled and lined up another tennis ball from the mountain behind him. He probably wouldn't have chosen tennis, even from the list of sports lessons available to him. But Ryoma had offered to teach him a thing or two, and with one look at how those black eyes sparkled at the prospect, he had caved. "Nowhere to go but up, right?"

"Up and over the net, hopefully." Ryoma said back. Shuichi tossed the ball in the air and swung. His racket did not connect.

He grabbed at the sadly bouncing ball, eventually clutching it on the third try. He heard Ryoma politely muffling a laugh to himself. "Okay, that one doesn't count. We're not discussing that."

By the time Shuichi had recomposed himself after chasing the rogue ball, his tutor had managed to return to a neutral expression and was nodding respectfully. "Of course, bud. I'm only giving you feedback on serves anyway. And that," he said, another smile breaking through his cool exterior, "you know, wasn't one."

Shuichi's jaw went slack at the unexpected snark and familiarity of that. "Oh, okay, wow. Do you give all your rookies this much grief, or am I a special case?" He tried another serve. This time he connected, and the ball soared over the net.

Ryoma hit it back toward him, not even needing to take a step, then said, "Special case. I'd be giving you a much harder time if you were on my team."

Now it was Shuichi's turn again, but his successful serve had made him confident. He raised his racket to retaliate, saying, "Ah, so Ryoma Hoshi has soft spots?" Shuichi's racket connected with a pop. The ball flew wildly out of the court, landing several courts over.

He winced with embarrassment, the wind out of his sails. Ryoma's voice sputtered as he tried, once again, to suppress a laugh. This time the laugh won, and his deep voice, quiet as it was, shot through Shuichi like the first ray of sunlight after a day inside. It was hard not to notice his face getting warmer, and he wasn't sure if this was from the embarrassment of that terrible shot or the satisfaction at getting his stoic tutor to finally laugh. As he thought about it, he found himself laughing too.

The two weren't laughing for long before an annoyed 'ahem' interrupted them. A patron had walked over from another court. He was a surly man, maybe ten or even twenty years older than them. He was khaki and baby blue from head to toe, and everything from his leering eyes to the quirk of his mouth said that he was extremely inconvenienced by them.

Shuichi, determined not to fail every chance to use his English today, spoke first. "Hello, what can we do for you?"

"I don't mean to be rude, but you two are being disruptive to my game over there."

His tone made it very clear that being rude was not on his list of concerns. "If you can't take tennis seriously and keep your balls in your own court, I'll have to complain to security."

Shuichi was stunned. He hadn't expected the exchange to be so pointed and confrontational. He tried to find English words that would appease this man and save a little bit of his bruised ego, but the words were not coming to him. Ryoma, however, was much faster.

"Hey, this is his first time playing tennis. We are taking this seriously. Besides, there's three empty courts between us and you. How about I teach him a proper serve, and you go back to your game, okay?" Ryoma's voice was as even-handed as ever, as if he was waving a hand to shoo a mosquito away.

The man was unconvinced. "See that you do. I'd hate to have you both kicked out just because your friend here is a lost cause."

Ryoma just scoffed as the man walked back to his own court, but Shuichi was visibly dispirited. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get you in trouble. He's right though, I shouldn't really be here if I don't know what I'm doing. Maybe I should just go." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. Perhaps it was time to find his parents.

Ryoma watched Shuichi's hands unlock his phone, then across the courts to the nosy patron. An attendant was handing him a glass of red wine. Not a care in the world. Ryoma's grip on his racket tightened.

"Hey Shuichi, toss me a tennis ball. I want to show you something cool before you go." Shuichi gave him a suspicious look, but tossed him a ball. The tennis player shifted his weight, angled his feet just right, and sent the ball flying. But it didn't return to Shuichi. This serve went precisely where Ryoma had planned. The ball sailed across three empty tennis courts, bounced off the ground and up into the patron's hand. Before Shuichi could even think to comment, his persecutor's whole front side was covered in red wine stains.

It didn't take long for the wine-soaked man to snap out of the shock of it all. When he turned to face the boys, there was fire in his eyes. "You'll pay for that, you punks! Security!"

Shuichi didn't wait to see who or how many security guards had heard the patron's yelling. He dropped his racket, ran across the court to Ryoma, who was looking on at the man's fit with a satisfied grin, and yanked at his sleeve. "Come on, Ryoma! We need to run!" There was a moment of silent processing between them, Ryoma's grin dropping in realization. Then they ran.

The two boys shot through the country club, cutting a war path through the immaculate planters and decorative fountains and packs of leisurely strolling adults. "The entrance is this way," Ryoma said between quick breaths, taking the lead in their great escape.

They still had most of the club between them and freedom, and Shuichi had no way of knowing just how much of the club's security force was on the way to stop them. Then he saw a distinctive building coming up on their right. The basketball courts. He grabbed Ryoma's hand and pulled him inside the courts.

Ryoma's description had been spot on. The inside was huge, several basketball courts side by side. But only two people, a pair of women, were inside, dribbling and squeaking their shoes at the far end. All that was near the two boys' side was a few discarded basketballs and a large, black, sports equipment bin. Careful not to squeak their shoes, the two rushed over to the bin and dove inside. A layer of fabric and inflated balls cushioned Shuichi's landing. Shuichi cushioned Ryoma's.

Ryoma cursed, whispering "My bad," but Shuichi quickly shushed him with one of his hands. The squeaks and bouncing thuds continued as normal. The two players hadn't noticed them. The boys looked to each other, and Shuichi retracted his hand from Ryoma's mouth. They stayed there a moment, Ryoma haphazardly on top of Shuichi's chest, unable to adjust without suspiciously rocking their hideout. Then the outside door behind them clicked open for a moment. They both froze.

Behind the squeaks and thuds of dribbling was an excruciating silence, but eventually the two heard the chirp of a walkie talkie and then, "Not here. I'm calling it. They're gone." And the doors clicked closed once again.

The two finally untangled themselves, each managing to just barely sit upright in the bin. Shuichi sighed with relief. "So," he said quietly, "that was close."

Ryoma laughed under his breath. "Yeah, that was kind of dumb. Good job losing them."

"It was. Thanks for showing me around." Shuichi smiled back.

"Yeah, well, he deserved it."

Shuichi could have argued more, but the warmth of Ryoma sticking up for him was enough to make him drop it. Instead, he said, "So, same time tomorrow?"

This was not what Ryoma had expected. "Really? You don't even like it here."

"You have practice, don't you?"

Ryoma was still confused, but he wasn't against the idea of seeing Shuichi again. "I do. What, are you going to play with us?" He leaned toward him and whispered, "Warming up to tennis, are we?"

Shuichi shook his head at the teasing. "Nope. Warming up to you, though." He leaned forward too, planting a fast, but soft kiss on the tennis star's stunned mouth. "I'll bring a book. See you tomorrow."

Shuichi climbed out of the bin, retrieved his phone, and dialed his mother as he walked out of the courts. "Hey mom, I'm ready to go."

Ryoma stayed alone in the bin for another five minutes, waiting in vain for his face to stop being so red, and the grin on his face to stop looking quite so uncool.

Blackjack in the Underworld

By: KibaSniper

While pachinko parlors were prevalent, it was the underbelly of a particular venue where the business boomed for the Kuzuryuu clan. If yakuza members ventured to a specific pachinko parlor in downtown Tokyo, they provided an employee with a password. The employee led them to an innocuous break room with a door hidden behind a metal vault. After unlocking it, they granted the yakuza entrance to where the real action happened.

If they walked down the cramped steps, the scent of whiskey struck them. Loud, grave voices followed, grunts of annoyance and guffaws of victory. At the bottom of the stairs, the large chandelier that had taken most of the ceiling's place became the centerpiece. It provided golden illumination over the many tables where dealers threw playing cards and dice at competitors. The russet shag carpet stretched across the floor, hardly stained by dishes flung by losing patrons, for the cleaning service was exceptional.

The men dressed in sleek business suits, and the women donned silk kimonos. The guests pinched their cards or set their chips on the table. Dealers observed with careful, sly eyes, scouring for underhanded tactics. Only they were approved by the Kuzuryuus to swindle yen out of the players' hands.

But as the raucous banter and sneering stemmed from every table, Kuzuryuu wasn't interested in them. The quaint bar in the corner dealt only the best wines and cocktails, each glass clean on the shelves behind the bartenders in their skin-tight dresses. Although he didn't drink, Kuzuryuu sat on a stool with Nanami sipping from martini glasses filled with ice water and picking at sushi with their chopsticks.

He sighed, swallowing a sliver of an ice cube and glancing over at Pekoyama, who stood guard next to him. "Same night as every night, huh?" he asked her.

Pekoyama nodded. "Indeed. It's as lively as always." She slightly cocked her head at Nanami, who polished off her sashimi. "Let's hope it stays civil."

Kuzuryuu caught her meaning and snaked his hand behind his neck. It wasn't like he meant to bring Nanami to an illegal, underground gambling den. It was *her* idea. He had let it slip that his parents owned the joint, and she wanted to accompany him, insisting it would have been like battling it out in a multiplayer game with real-life loot boxes for prizes.

The simile hardly suited the situation, but Kuzuryuu lacked the heart to deny Nanami. How her eyes had sparkled, lighting up with joy at the prospect of playing, convinced him. Even if it earned Pekoyama's ire, for the den was certainly no place for a kind, quiet girl like Nanami, Kuzuryuu was delighted that it was, so far, a mellow evening. When they arrived, most welcomed them with polite salutations or acknowledging nods, giving them their space to huddle together at the bar. There hadn't been any inkling of trouble or a thrown beer bottle at someone's head while they ate and chatted in peace. Kuzuryuu knew Pekoyama and his security team would tend to any provocateurs before they even considered shooting up from their stool after losing a round.

"So," Nanami said, setting her chopsticks on her empty plate, "what should we play? Maybe a card game?"

Kuzuryuu quickly brought his drink to his lips. He slowly sipped and gathered his thoughts. He had anticipated Nanami would persist in gambling, even if her opponents were associates of rival gangs. They weren't her regular competitors in video game tournaments; they had fresh blood on their hands, regardless of whether they kindly greeted her.

With a sigh, he said, "Eh, since I can't change your mind, let me warn ya. Some of these guys get pretty pissed off when they lose." He gnawed on the inside of his cheek. "We've had some ugly fights not too long ago that ended with a few nasty hospitalizations. I don't see the usual volatile troublemakers tonight, but I'd still be wary." He rested his calloused palm on top of her soft hand. His fingers curled inward, his thumb stroking her knuckles. "They hate newcomers cutting in on potential profits."

"These men and women are of a crueler caliber, Nanami," Pekoyama supplied when she hummed, pressing her loose fist to her chin. "They are dangerous, especially when money is on the line. Wealth is an evil root. They might be in Kuzuryuu territory, but that doesn't imply emotions won't run high and cause altercations."

She nodded, her gaze drifting over to the games. Kuzuryuu followed to where her eyes lingered. The closest table had a round of three card poker ensuing with voices so subdued Kuzuryuu couldn't hear their bets. In contrast, a boisterous match of blackjack bellowed with laughter. The occupants were members of the same mob, as indicated by their viper neck tattoos but mostly unmarred skin, implying they were recent recruits.

There was also a tense game of roulette near the entrance. The grizzled faces of the losers sharpened, glowering at the petite woman who delicately gathered the chips she had won. Nanami's attention focused on the girl, and Kuzuryuu quickly understood why.

"Is that Celestia Ludenberg? Our underclassman?" she wondered. "Wow. She has a lot of chips."

Kuzuryuu twitched and grabbed his knee. She was more than right. Celes, wearing a jet black kimono and sporting a bobbed haircut, had blended seamlessly with the other women. She was on the path to hundreds of thousands of yen, as evidenced by the sweat trickling down the dealer's face.

"Looks like she's having a ton of fun," Nanami added, smiling at him.

An uneasily chuckle rolled off his tongue. "Yeah, uh, at this rate, that chick will clear out one of the Kuzuryuu bank accounts if she doesn't pocket all the cash these guys have first."

Pekoyama crouched by him. "Would you like me to suggest she leave the establishment? I believe that will prevent an imminent incident."

Nanami sucked in a quiet breath through her teeth. "Do you think she's in danger?"

Kuzuryuu gently squeezed her hand. "Just as a precaution. It's better to go when you're winning, right?"

She nodded, her brows furrowing. It seemed she was beginning to understand the unspoken pressure in the room. Whenever one bettor was prevailing over other influential people, they often strove to eliminate the victor by any means necessary, including outside the venue.

He gave the order. Pekoyama straightened and silently strode over to Celes. The other participants almost seemed grateful for her intervention; Kuzuryuu noticed one of the men heaved a sigh of genuine relief. They conversed, Celes' thin-lipped smile spreading into her pale cheeks, and she had the nerve to giggle.

Nanami leaned back against the bar, her free hand languidly reaching for her drink. She eyed the lemon wedge, her expression contemplative. She ran her index finger against the curve in Kuzuryuu's palm, tracing a faint scar, the smoothness of her touch coaxing a sigh out of him.

"Kuzuryuu-kun," she began, "I know it's dangerous, but I'd still like to try."

He groaned through his clenched teeth. Nanami's obstinacy both charmed and frustrated him. If she was urging him to rest after a long day, her tone soft like velvet, he was bewitched by her, but the den was not a place for a lady like Nanami. She hadn't seen the depths of his harsh reality, a world he liked to keep separate from her, even though she had already nudged open the door.

He chose his words carefully. "I - I know. I'm not saying you're wrong, but-"

Grumbling rose from Celes' table. One of the men slowly rose to his feet, cracking his knuckles. Celes simply grinned and set forward three chips. The dealer shot Pekoyama a worried glance, but Celes interjected with a comment Kuzuryuu couldn't hear over the merriment from the blackjack table.

Pulling her attention away from the cajoling younger men, Nanami quickly leaned toward Kuzuryuu's ear. Her cool breath tickled his freckled skin. He withheld his gasp, shocked by her sudden intimacy. He almost wondered if she was about to kiss him, his lips involuntarily puckering, until she whispered her suggestion.

His eyes widened. When Nanami leaned back, grinning almost expectantly, he couldn't help but chuckle. What she had proposed would have dumbfounded or even enraged the deadliest of dons. But Nanami's potential opponents were a distinct variety of mooks, and Kuzuryuu found himself sharing in her amusement.

"When ya put it that way, it almost sounds stupid *not* to agree," he said. He chugged the rest of his water and handed it to the bartender. "If we're gonna do this, let's get it started before those bastards at Peko's table start getting too riled up. I'll put your bill on the house."

She shared a smile with him. She slipped her fingers across his palm as they stood. Kuzuryuu guided her to the blackjack table, noticing Pekoyama had sat down across from Celes, both girls tightly clenching dice. The men playing still cackled and chugged hard shots of whiskey, losing more money by the round.

"Oh, Kuzuryuu-sama, hello!" one of them shouted as they approached him, his words somewhat slurred. He looked like a student fresh out of college in his steam-pressed suit and slicked black hair. "Wicked great place you got! We love it!"

Kuzuryuu smirked and pulled out a seat for Nanami. "Heh! I figured you new kids would get your kicks here. Tell your boss I said hello, Oshima."

As Oshima bobbed his head, his cohort grunted. He adjusted his glasses and slouched, wrinkling his buttoned shirt. "Eh, we're older than you, shrimp. Aren't you still in high school? Gettin' rich off papa's cash?"

Nostrils flaring, Kuzuryuu leered down at him. He snatched the table edge, the dealer pausing his shuffling. "Hah? You think you can try talkin' down to me like that? You know where you are, right?" he demanded, lip curling.

While the dealer reached under the table, Oshima jumped to his flustered friend's defense. "O-oh, oh, uh, forgive Sakai. He's a t-total - a total moron when he's a few shots in, Kuzuryuu-sama. He's, um, our latest recruit."

As Sakai shuddered, Kuzuryuu flicked the trembling man's chin. "Tch. Fine. Oshima, teach him to respect the rules around here next time, or I won't let you guys off easy."

Satisfied when Sakai weakly chirped out his agreement, Kuzuryuu stepped back as Nanami sat down. Curious eyes immediately fell on her. Even the dealer hesitated, lifting the top two cards.

Kuzuryuu gently squeezed her shoulder as she bowed her head in greeting. "Meet my girl, Nanami. She wants to give blackjack a shot."

While Oshima and Sakai hesitated, a man wearing a dark fur jacket offered his hand. "Nice to meet you, Nanami-sama. I'm Gushiken," he said, his deep voice tempering the others.

"Nice to meet you, too," she replied with a soft smile. She waved at the other men, who were too far away to properly shake hands. "If it's okay with everyone, I'd like to play against only you three, not the dealer."

Kuzuryuu, standing behind her, narrowed his eyes. Sweat beaded on their brows. Even the collected Gushiken appeared to bite down on his lip. But when Kuzuryuu gave a slight nod to the dealer, he swiftly tossed out the cards, explaining the rules for Nanami's benefit.

"Ya start with two cards from me. Then, you call by asking for one card at a time in hopes of getting closer to a total of twenty-one. If ya go over, ya lose the round. Stay as close to twenty-one as possible to win. Also, in the middle of all that, ya put forward as many chips ya wanna bet per round. Capiche?"

Nanami nodded sternly. "Capiche."

The cards were dealt. Oshima, Sakai, and Gushiken inspected their hands. Sakai folded, but Oshima and Gushiken placed their bets of a few thousand yen each. Nanami peered at her cards, a five and a four, and she put forward a few chips. They each called, Oshima striking out immediately and drowning his sorrows in whiskey. Gushiken and Nanami glanced at each other before calling again, but it was Nanami who reached a total of fifteen while he went over.

Kuzuryuu broke into a grin and kneaded her shoulders. "Way to go!"

She chuckled. "It was really close."

Gushiken's mouth twitched as he stated his congratulations. Sakai and Oshima warily eyed each other, but they drowned their worries in alcohol.

Nanami was awarded their chips, and another game followed. She pushed forward the chips she had earned. Gushiken arched a bushy brow at her tactic before matching her bet. Sakai followed suit, only to wince when he received a card that pushed him over twenty-one. Oshima sucked in a breath through his teeth and decided to stay with his cards, leaving Gushiken and Nanami to battle against each other. They called, and the dealer tossed out two more cards. They peered at each other, Kuzuryuu observing Nanami's close hand, and he nudged his thumbs into her skin.

"I'll stay," she said, and Gushiken nodded.

They revealed their cards. Oshima had seventeen, and Gushikien had eighteen. Nanami succeeded with nineteen, and the dealer nudged their chips toward her while the other yakuza remained simply befuddled by her winnings.

On and on, they played. Chips went back and forth. Luck blessed Nanami, who secured more earnings as her opponents paled, sweating profusely, staining the armpits of their clothes. Through it all, Kuzuryuu sneered, unable to hide his enjoyment when all of the chips landed in Nanami's lap, her fifth game's victory with a total of twenty-one forcing Sakai to fall out of his chair.

Nanami giggled. Her eyes lit up at the sight of dozens of chips blocking her view of the table. Kuzuryuu laughed along with her, the three goons sitting in a state of sobering awe. He flashed a cocky smirk at them, asking if they wanted to try again.

They sputtered. Sakai pulled himself together, even though his glasses fogged. Oshima was out of quips and jokes. Gushiken looked like he had seen a ghost while he guzzled down the rest of his whiskey.

But Nanami stood up. She nudged the chips to the center of the table, saying, "Thanks for letting me join you. I had a blast."

"H-huh? You just-? I mean, you're not takin' our cash?" Gushiken cried, his jaw dropping so far Kuzuryuu thought it would strike the table.

She shook her head and pushed in her seat. "Not at all. I just wanted to play a game." A yawn ghosted past her lips as she turned to Kuzuryuu. "It's getting late. We should probably call it a night."

He nodded, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. He led her away from the table, his pride and delight at an all-time high. He felt their gazes on their backsides, and over his shoulder, he called, "She's a real generous girl, ain't she?

Immediately, they profusely thanked her for not breaking their banks. Nanami hummed, admitting she was unsure why they started to cry, but Kuzuryuu simply snickered. If they had actually forfeited thousands of yen, their boss would have ensured they'd sleep with the fish in Tokyo Bay.

They rejoined Pekoyama, who had wrapped up her game. Celes was long gone. To Kuzuryuu's bewilderment, a red lipstick mark adorned Pekoyama's cheek. When he gestured at it, she feverishly scrubbed it with a cloth she yanked from her pocket.

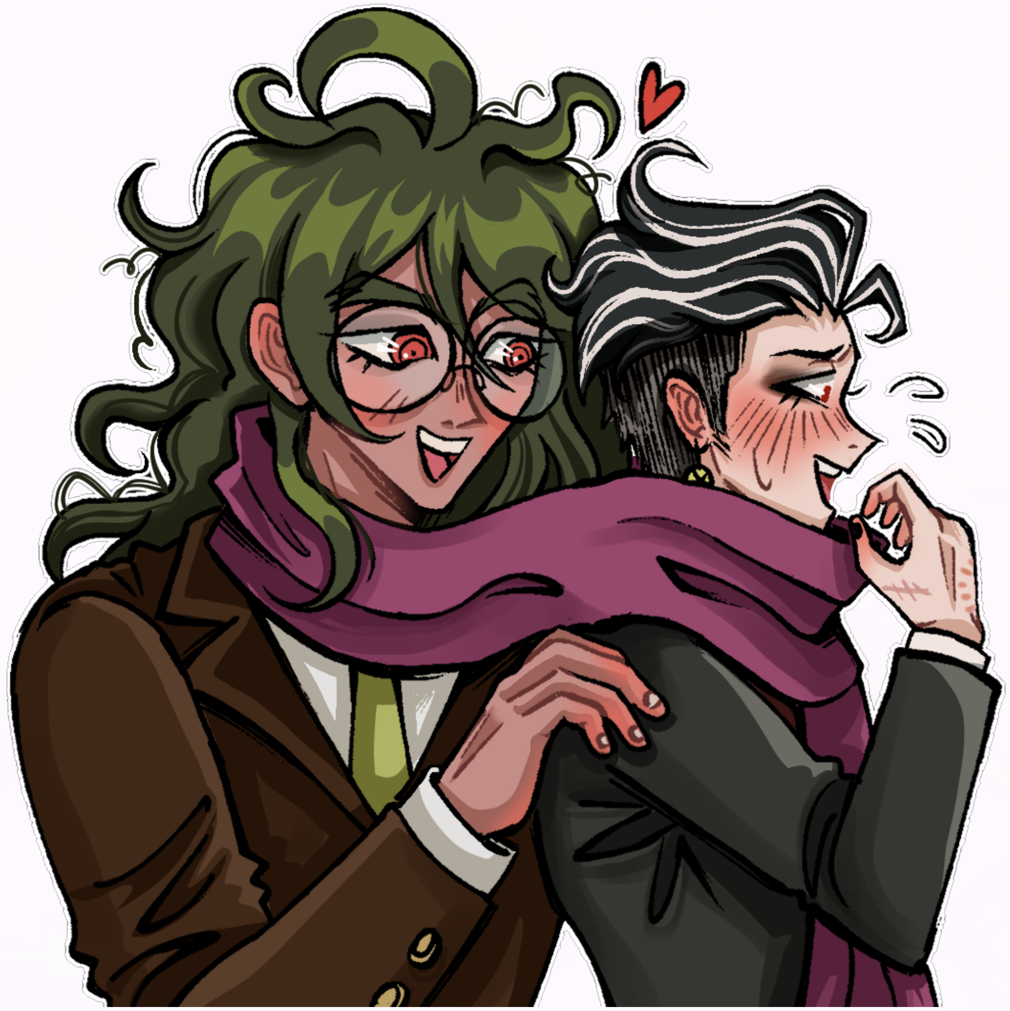
"I think you had a fun time, too?" Nanami asked, tilting her head.

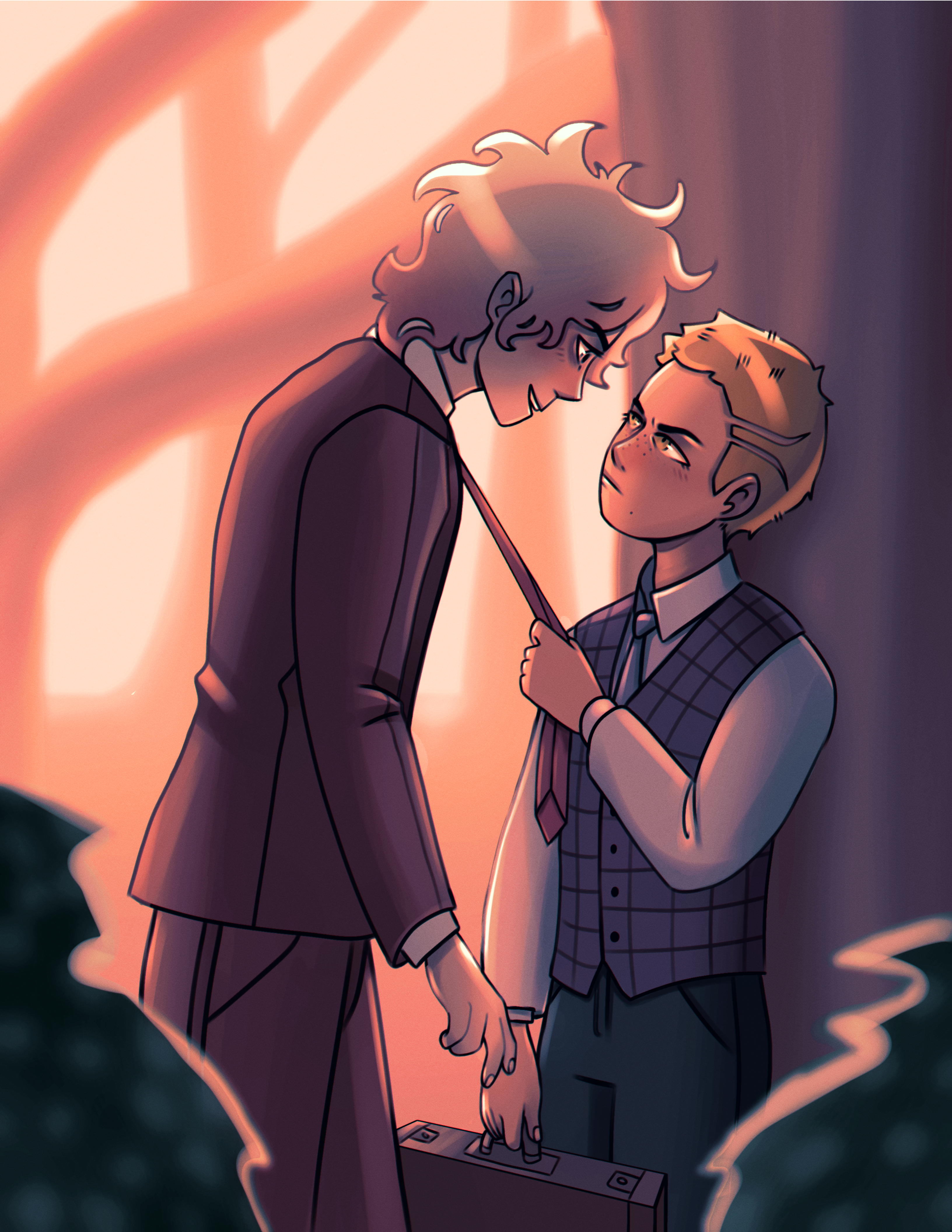
Pekoyama's cheeks burned the same color as the lipstick. "She is…a persuasive and cunning character, but she left without problems after winning two more times," was all she said, unwilling to explain further. The corners of her lips lifting betrayed her embarrassment.

As they walked up the steps and abandoned the stench of liquor, Kuzuryuu caught Nanami's gaze. They held it, lingering in the doorway while the games continued below. Nanami leaned forward, pressing a chaste kiss to his dry lips. When she parted, Kuzuryuu's complexion was warming from her kiss, and she whispered if they could come again.

"I'll rent this joint out for the night, and we can play 'til the parlor closes," he promised, and the sparkle in Nanami's eyes was worth more than all the yen in Japan.

Below: @redactedhaunt





In This Room, Only With You

By: FallFromtheStars

"Tojo-Chan! Look at this!" Akamatsu yelled excitedly as she pointed at the large grand piano. She immediately ran to the piano and sat on the seat. Her hands pressed the keys lightly, delighting in the soft and sweet sounds. Tojo looked on fondly.

She was examining the rest of the area as she let her girlfriend have fun. It was a rather extravagant place. There were various sweets laid out in the small kitchen. Tojo knew her girlfriend would delight in them so she picked them up. She walked back to the main room and listened to her girlfriend play. Akamatsu was wearing a pretty purple dress that Tojo had specifically made for her. Tojo admired how beautiful she looked.

"Tojo-Chan! Come here!"

Tojo did as her girlfriend said and approached the piano. Akamatsu patted the seat and Tojo sat next to her. Tojo revealed the chocolates she found. Akamatsu stared at them hungrily. Before Tojo could offer one, Akamatsu picked one up and lifted it to Tojo's lips. Tojo cautiously opened her mouth and let Akamatsu put the chocolate in her mouth. Akamatsu smiled and giggled.

"You need to relax, Tojo-Chan, you spend too much time thinking of others," Akamatsu said. Tojo didn't respond because she knew that she would never win this argument. She had told Akamatsu that her goal was to serve, but the blonde always insisted otherwise. But, Tojo was willing to let Akamatsu pamper her if it meant seeing her bright smile. Akamatsu leaned her head on Tojo's shoulder, humming a song.

"Akamatsu-San, don't you want some?" Tojo asked as she gestured to the candy. Akamatsu nodded but then she giggled.

"Don't refer to me so formally. We're dating, aren't we? I do like candy, but I like seeing you enjoy it more," Akamatsu said. She had a light blush dusting her cheeks. Tojo loved seeing her so happy.

They had been together for a year now and Tojo didn't regret any part of it. Akamatsu had helped her to start thinking of herself instead of others but it was still a struggle at times. Akamatsu grabbed Tojo's hand. Tojo felt warm and happy. Only Akamatsu could calm the raging storm that was her thoughts. She was constantly thinking of how to help others and fulfill her duties.

"Akamatsu, can I hear you play some more?" Tojo asked. Akamatsu nodded and put her delicate hands on the piano. Tojo never got tired of listening to the music that Akamatsu created. It was always beautiful and melodic. Tojo recognized the song as Clair de Lune. It was one of Akamatsu's favorite songs as she had a love for songs that were gentle and soothing but also melancholic. No one could play the piano as well as her and Tojo felt honored to be able to experience it. When she was done, Akamatsu threw her arms around Tojo.

"Let's have fun here!" Akamatsu exclaimed. Tojo laughed softly and hugged her back. Akamatsu's excitement was always contagious.

Akamatsu grabbed a chocolate-covered strawberry from the box and held it out for her. Tojo ate it and savored the sweet flavor. Akamatsu had a big smile on her face as she looked at her.

"You should have some, Akamatsu," Tojo said as she grabbed another one of the strawberries and brought it to Akamatsu's mouth. The blonde ate it happily, humming and smiling.

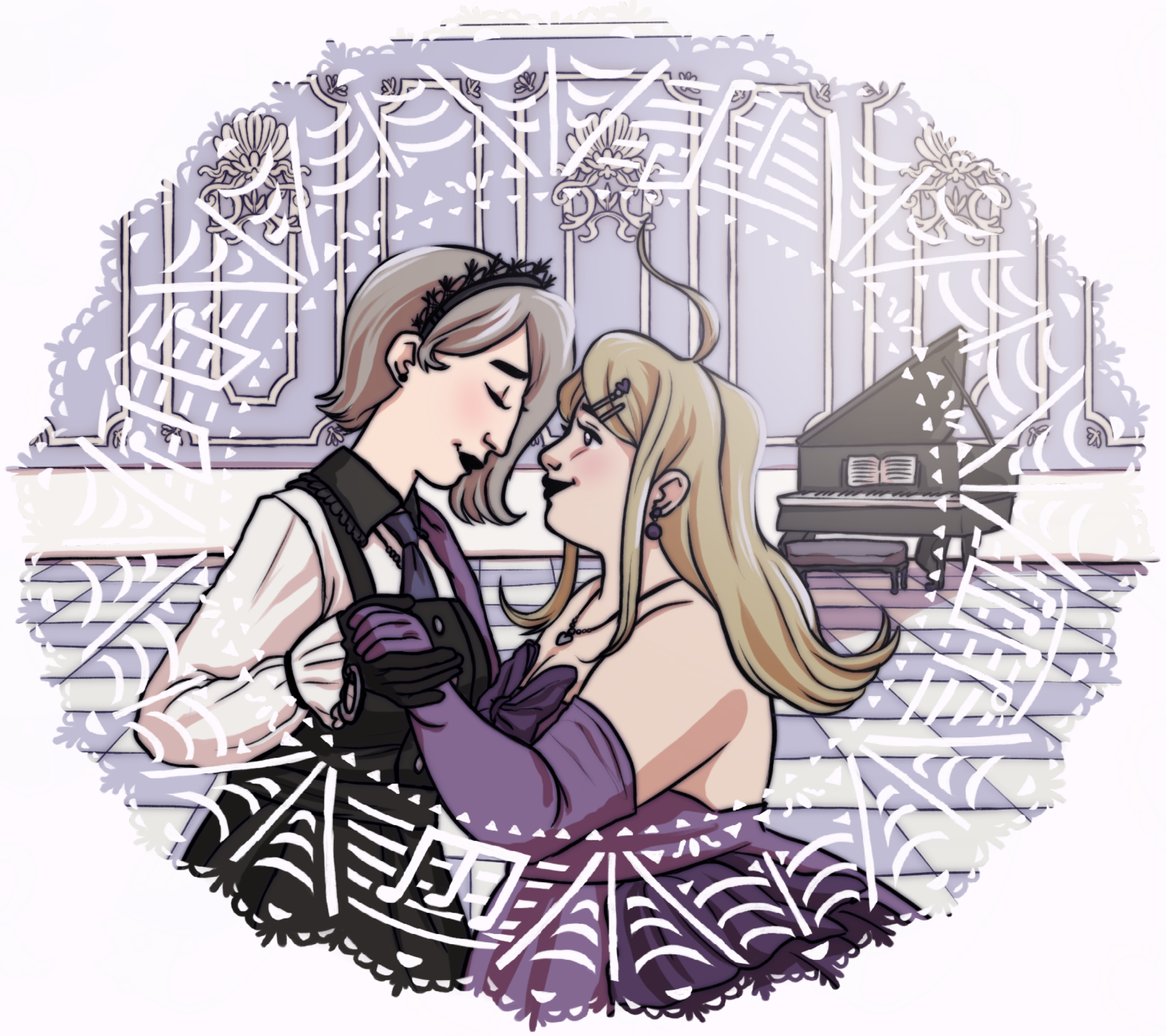
"We should dance," Akamatsu recommended. Tojo agreed and let Akamatsu drag her to the middle of the room. There was no music playing, but that didn't matter to them. Tojo led the dance as usual.

Akamatsu was a fine dancer but she had difficulty being the one leading a dance. They swayed close together, Akamatsu looking extremely happy. Tojo was wearing a necklace that Akamatsu had made her and Akamatsu was wearing her matching necklace. Tojo felt so grateful to have the bright and happy girl with her. Akamatsu was special. Tojo had never had someone so kind and energetic. She was the first person to ever break through her thoughts on service.

Tojo was wearing her usual outfit, except there were altercations made by her girlfriend. The main change was the addition of music note patterns. She had explained to the pianist that she wanted something to remind her of the blonde. Akamatsu suggested the music notes and she went to sewing her dress. Akamatsu seemed to love the addition. She had made a cute comment about giving her spiderwebs some company.

Akamatsu giggled as Tojo spun her. Tojo watched in awe as her blonde hair spun as well. She looked like an angel. Tojo couldn't help reflecting on their relationship. both made each other better people. Tojo had taught Akamatsu not to face her problems alone and Akamatsu had taught Tojo to care for herself and think of her own well-being.

Below: @kirbybot



Akamatsu held her tight and gently moved Tojo's bangs out of her face to caress her cheek. Tojo had never felt such love in her heart before.

Tojo's steps were practiced and careful, while Akamatsu often stumbled or stepped on the maid's feet. But, she didn't mind at all. She knew that her girlfriend was inexperienced and she found her stumbling to be rather cute. The blonde always apologized and Tojo had to reassure her that it really didn't matter. She admired her girlfriend's beauty as they danced. Tojo was careful not to step on Akamatsu's dress since she knew how much the other liked it. The blonde had such a unique charm that Tojo had never seen before. It was no wonder she was so popular. The maid pulled her close as they stepped. Tojo made sure to not choose one of the more complex dances she was trained in.

Tojo dipped Akamatsu and smiled as she looked down at her. Akamatsu's face had turned bright pink as Tojo leaned down to kiss her. The pianist was always one for romantic gestures that many would consider cheesy.

"I love you, To-Chan," Akamatsu whispered the words like they were a prayer. Tojo smiled and kissed her again, softly.

"I love you too, Akamatsu," Tojo whispered. She wanted to live in this moment forever. With Akamatsu forever. "Can you… play me another song?"

"Of course, To-Chan!" Akamatsu exclaimed as she hurried back to the piano. She always hurried to complete any request Tojo had since they were so rare. She started to play a gentle melody on the piano. It was Symphony Number 6 by Beethoven, and it was a rather complicated song to play on piano, but Akamatsu's fierce determination showed through as she played. It was one of Tojo's favorite songs after all. Akamatsu closed her eyes, letting herself get swept up in the music. Tojo stared lovingly as she listened. Akamatsu could always capture the attention of an entire room with her beautiful piano playing.

Tojo got up and slowly walked over to sit beside Akamatsu on the piano seat. She placed her hands on the piano and gave Akamatsu a look. Akamatsu nodded and got into position. Soon, the room was filled with a song that only two people could do. One they had made themselves. Akamatsu was giggling as they played which, to Tojo, was more beautiful than any song.

When the song came to an end, they both let out a breath. Akamatsu laid her head on Tojo's shoulder and Tojo wrapped her arm around her. They had been working on that song together for a long time. Tojo shook out her hair as a thought came to her mind.

"Have you gotten better about what we talked about?" She asked. Akamatsu hummed before she answered. Tojo was trapped in her beautiful purple eyes.

"I believe so. Saihara-Kun said I was getting better," Akamatsu said. They were talking about Akamatsu's self-sacrificial behavior. She naturally took a very selfless role in her relationships and it was something that concerned Tojo. She was worried that one day Akamatsu would get hurt while trying to protect her friends.

"That's good. I just don't want you getting hurt. None of our friends want you to get hurt either," Tojo said. Akamatsu nodded. She stroked her hands through her girlfriend's soft hair.

Akamatsu took out one of her music note hair clips and swept Tojo's bangs to the side to pin them there. The maid looked at her girlfriend curiously and the blonde laughed.

"I want to see your pretty green eyes," Akamatsu said. Tojo knew that she was probably the one who was pink now. She had never met someone who could make her so flustered. She was usually extremely put together. She never wanted to show any sign of weakness, but she felt safe being weak with her girlfriend.

"You are far too precious, Akamatsu," Tojo whispered. She was so madly in love. She was originally wary of starting a relationship since she worried it would interfere with her work. Akamatsu had to be the one to explain that her entire view on life was the problem. Akamatsu suddenly blushed as she looked at the floor.

"U-Um… Can you call me by my first name?" She asked shyly. The maid smiled and caressed her face.

"Of course, Kaede. I would do anything you ask me to. Not as a maid, but as Tojo Kirumi," she said. Akamatsu smiled and wrapped her arms around her. The maid stroked the pianist's hair kindly. She was surprised that someone as sweet and caring as Akamatsu was still dating her. She knew she could be a handful with her views on service and the two of them had gotten into quite a few arguments over that worldview. There were times when she thought that Akamatsu would be better off without her. Akamatsu always reassured her that she was in love with her and that was why she stayed.

"Kirumi, you're thinking too much. I can practically hear your thoughts," Akamatsu said. Tojo giggled. She should have expected that. Her girlfriend was extremely perceptive. Akamatsu smiled. "I love your laugh. I love everything about you."

"I love you more," Tojo said. Akamatsu pouted and crossed her arms. The two of them often went on and on about who loved who more. She had gotten used to just accepting defeat when Tojo started it. Tojo was far too stubborn after all.

"Kirumi, thank you. Thank you for everything you've done for me. You care for me so well and I don't know where I would be without you. I think I would be in a much darker place," Akamatsu said, and she truly meant her words. Tojo was her first love and she was glad that it was her of all people. She couldn't imagine falling in love with anyone else now that she knew Tojo's love. It took a long time to get rid of her barrier but it was worth it. These moments together were worth everything.

"There is no need to thank me, Kaede. You have done so much for me as well. I am so grateful that you have lightened my life," Tojo said, and Akamatsu blushed as she heard her first name. Tojo was surprised that she hadn't asked to be called it a long time ago. She stroked the blonde's cheek lovingly and leaned in to kiss her. When they broke the kiss, they stared into each other's eyes. The trust they saw there was so overwhelming. It felt as if the two of them were the only ones left in the world.

"Can I play you another song, Kirumi?" Akamatsu asked. Tojo nodded and watched as her girlfriend took a deep breath to prepare herself. Her hands then flew over the keys as the notes took form. Tojo admired how beautiful she looked as she concentrated. She always looked so good when she played. It was like the music was the only thing she cared about.

Tojo could tell that the song was Gymnopédie by Erik Satie. Her understanding of music from her training had become very useful in her relationship with Akamatsu. The happy blonde often described things through songs. Tojo closed her eyes and allowed herself to be swept up in the song. She swayed happily, knowing that her girlfriend was the one playing her such a lovely melody.

Hotel Getaway

By: LightRedFox

“This sacred abode is now ours!!!” Gundham proclaimed with a thunderous voice; his arms raised high enough to be level with the doorframe. Peko didn’t seem phased by her partner’s usual extravagance, already quite used to his tendency to cause a spectacle. Fuyuhiko, on the other hand, rolled his eyes, avoiding the looks the other clan members in the hall were giving them as he followed Peko into the hotel suite.

The room they were staying in was expansive in both size and luxury, befitting its status as a place reserved only for the most exclusive guests. A sparkling chandelier with countless crystals glittered above the living area, the white light it reflected bouncing towards the large couches surrounding a low glass table. Rows of sleekly designed cabinets and shelves covered the walls of the open kitchen, and a long, marble countertop was covered with baskets of the freshest fruit available in the area, from mangoes to peaches.

Fuyuhiko knew that he wasn’t going to have the time to fully bask in the luxury of the suite due to yakuza business he had to take care of, but it was certainly impressive enough for him to be reassured that his companions would find pleasure in their stay. If the first room were any indication, the bedrooms would be just as comfortable, if not better.

“With a single mighty step onto this sanctuary tied to the deciduous scales of time, I declare myself the rightful ruler of this piece of territory—”

“Yeah yeah, be fuckin’ quiet already.” Fuyuhiko sighed as he threw a backpack onto the couch—the only baggage Peko allowed him to carry to their hotel suite.

“Alright, you two get cozy. I’ll be gone the whole day, so just don’t die and shit. And keep those animals of yours in the room!” He pointed an accusing finger at Gundham, “Last thing either of us want are dead rats.”

On cue, one of the Devas poked its head out from below Gundham’s chin at the comment. Gundham just scoffed, and gently pushed the hamster’s head back into his scarf with a finger. Peko walked over to Fuyuhiko, still holding the several bags she had carried in.

“Mast—I mean, Fuyuhiko, are you sure you don’t wish for me to accompany you to the meeting?” Peko’s expression barely changed as she asked the question, but he could tell from years of being by her side that the slight twitch of the muscles near her cheeks gave away her worry.

“It’s my duty to keep you safe. We don’t know what the Akiyama clan is planning; they could be trying to ambush you.”

“If they’re smart, they’ll know not to cross a potential investor. Besides, I told ya thousands of times—the guys downstairs will be more than enough protection for me if things go south. Everyone in the clan is hot shit, not just us.”

“My dearest Pekoyama,” Gundham stepped towards her to take a bag from her grasp, “if the small one believed the danger that was afoot would be too much for a lord such as I to handle, he would not have made the decision to unite us once more.”

“Tanaka…” Peko hesitated, and that small action was all the affirmation Fuyuhiko needed.

“You heard him, Peko. I’ll be downstairs with the Akiyama boss. Natsumi is next door if you need any help, alright? And DON’T call me small ever again, fucker.”

Fuyuhiko glanced sharply at Gundham, who didn’t utter a word in response, simply snorting at his words. With that, the yakuza heir disappeared behind the main suite doors and slammed them shut.

◆

Peko positioned herself in front of the ocean view from her bedroom window, not even accepting the luxury of sitting herself on the bed or chairs nearby. The hotel owned by the neighboring Akiyama clan was a resort built right next to the sand, so guests had access to the territory’s own private beach. Tourists and locals alike flocked to the extravagant resort, so it was no surprise there were crowds of people basking under the sun, playing in the sand, or splashing near the shore. However, they were just specks of moving color to the swordswoman, who was more keen on spotting any potential threats to the safety of the Kuzuryuu clan than even thinking about relaxing herself.

She had been stationed like this ever since she left Fuyuhiko’s luggage in the other bedroom and unpacked the little that she had brought for herself. Gundham had taken a lot longer to settle down in the room due to all the necessities he carried for the Dark Devas, but once the four hamsters had settled down on the bed sheets rather than the usual comfort of his scarf, he finally had time to approach Peko. She could sense him coming towards her, yet continued to gaze outside, even when he placed his bandaged left hand on her shoulder.

“My dearest, the scorching star of molten fire is unrelenting in its passive onslaught. This pellucid aperture cannot protect you for too long.”

“I put on sunscreen, no need to worry.” She gave him a glance. “It’s in my bag if you need any.”

Gundham scoffed at that, folding his arms together.

“Hmph, those so-called healing salves provide only temporary salvation from the radiance of Helios. What is truly necessary is to harness the power of the elements! By accepting the blessings of the deity of water, we can invigorate our spirits with vitality!” He let out a bellowing laugh.

“You can take a bath without me. I’ll just keep watch for a few more hours.”

His laughter quickly ceased. Gundham clicked his tongue in disappointment at the rejection, taking a moment to think of his next words before responding.

“Pekoyama. You perform your duty wonderfully, and are worth thousands of the golden dragon’s best men. However, as is the burden of mortal vessels, even the strongest of warriors must take time to replenish their strength, including both me and you.”

He reached his right hand out and gingerly touched her arm, squeezing it gently to make her turn to fully face him.

“Come, join me in cleansing our souls of the earthly sins of this mortal plane. It would not be just to waste the bountiful blessings we have been given.”

To seal the deal, he pressed a chaste kiss to her cheek. Peko gave a hum in thought, his words swaying her in his favor.

“…Alright, I guess we can bathe quickly. It was a long trip here after all.”

“Then we must make haste! Allow me a moment to summon forth the power of Poseidon himself!” Gundham exclaimed, running off towards the bathroom to prepare the bath. Behind him, Peko let out a soft chuckle, forever amused at his dramatics for the simplest of things.

* * *

The bath was relaxing; for the short moment it lasted. The tub of the master bathroom was made for two people, so there were no worries about awkwardly trying to squeeze their bodies to fit. The hot running water gushing from the faucets relaxed their tensed-up muscles, and the complimentary honey-scented body scrubs were put to good use, washing away the dry skin from every part of their bodies. The sweet smell did end up attracting one of Gundham’s hungry hamsters to enter the bathroom, and the breeder sighed before exiting the bath prematurely to scoop up his beloved fur ball before it fell into the water. Peko remained soaked in the bath at Gundham’s insistence, assuring her that he could handle the hamsters by himself. After coaxing her to stay submerged in the water and drying himself off, he shut the door to the bathroom and fed the Dark Devas some sunflower seeds.

Gundham found himself lying on the freshly ironed sheets of his bed soon after, enjoying the way the threaded silk, cool to the touch thanks to the ventilation, brushed against the exposed skin of his chest and limbs. The Dark Devas were placed on the pillows next to where he lay his head, all four content from their meal and dozing off on the soft cushions. His hair, normally swirled up with copious amounts of hair gel, fell naturally over his face, tickling his nose. It took a lot of time and care to get it to look right every morning, but at night it was easy to just pat the short, black and white-streaked hair down with a towel. He didn’t even need to bother with a hair dryer.

The sun was already setting, and though it was blinding, the orange it painted the sky was incomparable to anything else, a one-of-a-kind view. As he looked out the window, vivid memories of spending time after school with Peko surfaced in his mind, and he smiled to himself as he recalled the moments they could chat together in solitude, watching the same sun dip behind the buildings of Hope's Peak. A few things had changed since the last time they watched it fall together, namely their relationship status, but the times spent together, even before they knew they were more than friends, were equally as precious, if not more, than the ones they were making now.

The sound of the bathroom door unlocking brought Gundham’s attention back to the present. Peko exited the door wearing a black bathrobe, her hands preoccupied with drying out her long silver hair with a towel. Though the bathrobe covered her torso and upper limbs, it still gave him enough of a view to see the many scars that littered her body. Some were long slashes; others were tiny nicks he had only noticed from laying next to her. Of course, he had many of his own, but the sources of their existence were much more innocent in comparison. Peko was cracked, in more ways than one.

She joined him on the bed, sitting down to his left and placing the damp towel on the bedside table. Gundham pushed himself up to rest his back against the headboard and reached a hand out to touch a small scar on the side of her left arm, just below her wrist.

"This one is new."

She sighed, following the light touches of his fingers to trace over it.

"From two weeks ago. I was supposed to dispose of a loan shark, but he had security that was stronger than expected."

He thumbed over it, noticing how it was circular in shape rather than a singular thin line.

"A bullet?"

"I don't deal with guns often; it was unexpected. Thankfully it was only a graze." Her eyes shifted away from her skin. "If I had been faster…."

He pressed a kiss to it before she could continue, holding her hand close to him.

"Let us not dwell on what has already come to pass. You are still trapped in this form after all; injuries are inevitable."

His eyes gazed downwards to his left hand, the missing bandages revealing the many scars of his own he had gained throughout the years—proof of both weakness and strength.

"Trapped, huh?" she murmured to herself, "I certainly don't feel human."

"Ah, Pekoyama! From the moment I laid my eyes upon you, I already knew there was no possibility you were an ordinary mortal!" Gundham chuckled deeply.

"Someone who moves with as much grace and beauty as you, truly, must have been sent from the heavens to smite a lord of darkness such as I."

"I'm…not sure we're talking about the same—"

"You may be no ordinary human, for you are something much grander than that. For what other reason have you managed to pull me, the Supreme Overlord of Ice, into your grasp?"

Gundham tilted her chin up to properly meet her eyes. Her glimmering red pupils focused on the one red contact lens he hadn't yet taken out.

"Let us bask together in these simple pleasures, for I am the king of your beating heart, and you shall be my queen for eternity."

"…Thanks. I'm glad we're together too." She felt herself become flustered at his words. Even if they were hard to understand, she could hear his emotions resonating inside them.

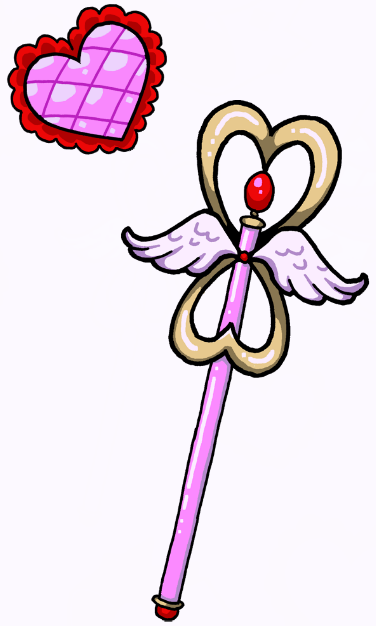
"Now then, how shall we spend the night?"

"I'm not too hungry. Can we just stay in bed for a while?"

"Food will be of no issue for me as well. For now, how about observing the ferocious creatures from the underground land known as Australia?"

"I do like koalas." Peko gave him an awkward smile. She wasn't used to smiling consciously, so it was the best she could do.

Gundham pressed something on the remote to make the television flicker to life. He switched the channel over to National Geographic, and smirked when Peko's face visibly lit up at the koalas on the screen clinging to the trees. She found herself cuddling up closer to her partner as the documentary began to play, the glow from the tv lighting up the room as the sky outside turned a dark blue.



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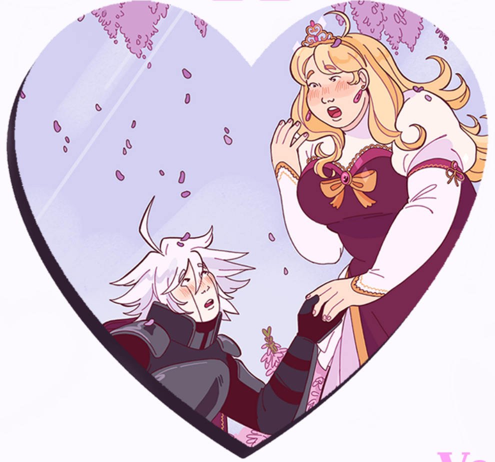
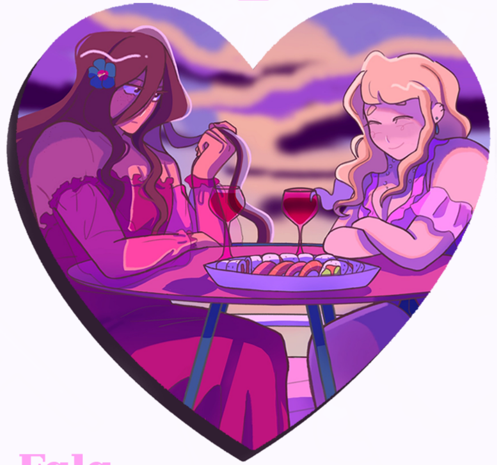
Quinn
@quinnsartbox

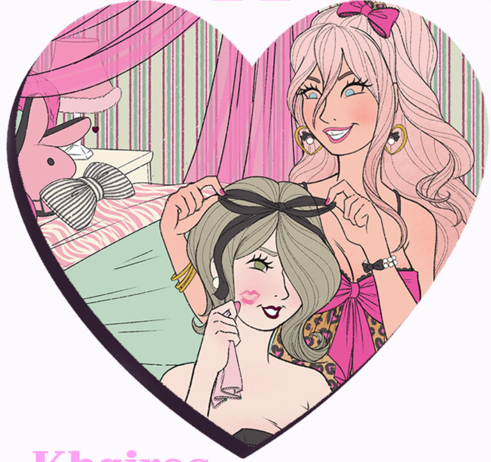


Serenade
@serenadepng

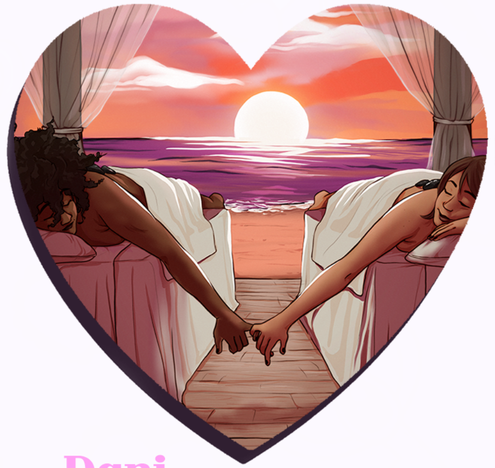
Roman
@transalbedo



Tilly
@tillytechnicolor



Lilah
@kirbybot



June
@qwerkid

Vega$
@cl0wnne

Fala
@falamcpasta

Khairos
@khairosclerosis

Dani
@dreamaruu

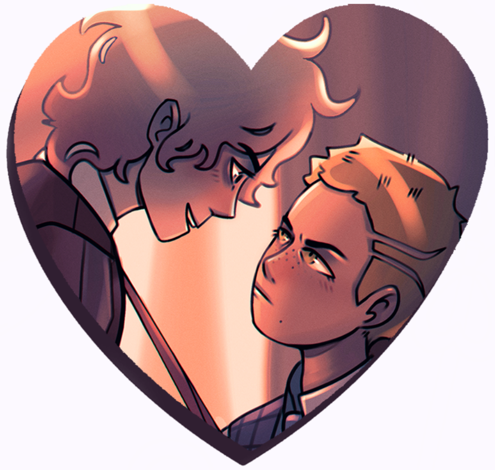
El
@sold1erEl

Sunny
@sir-sunny

Rowan
@mechaclowncore

Twinkle
@twinklelitchii

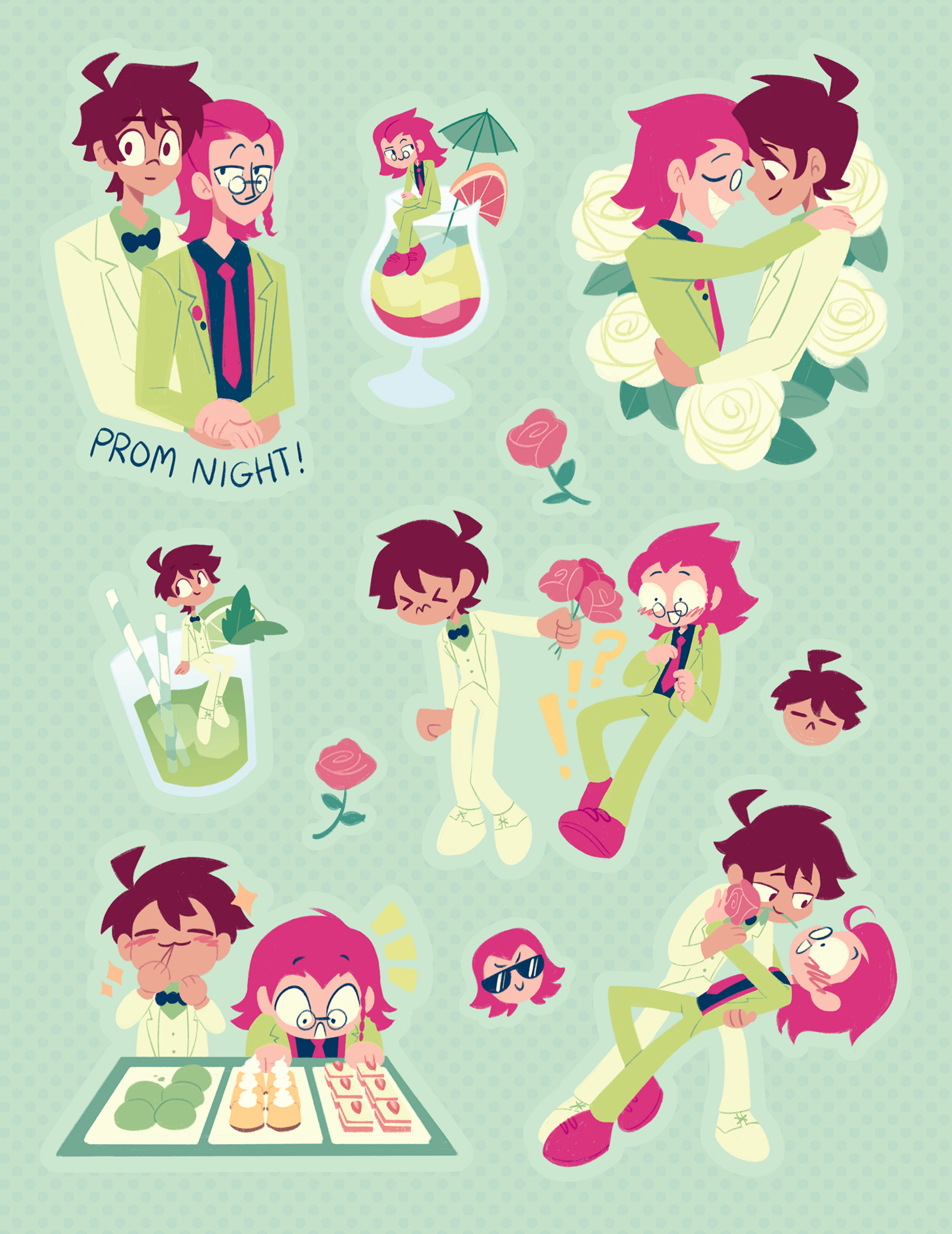
Zaide
@zaideaben



Merch

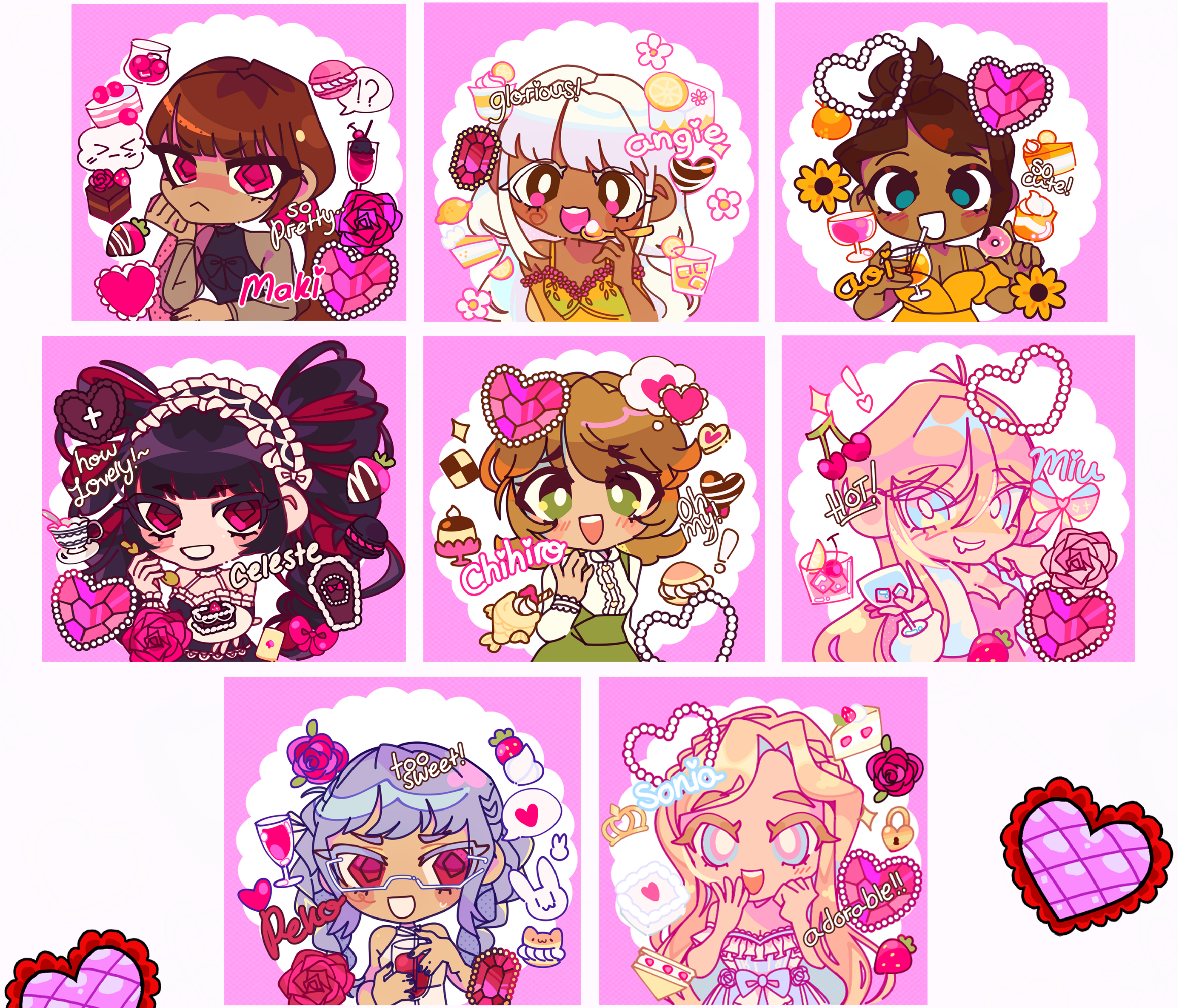
Printable Sticker Sheet

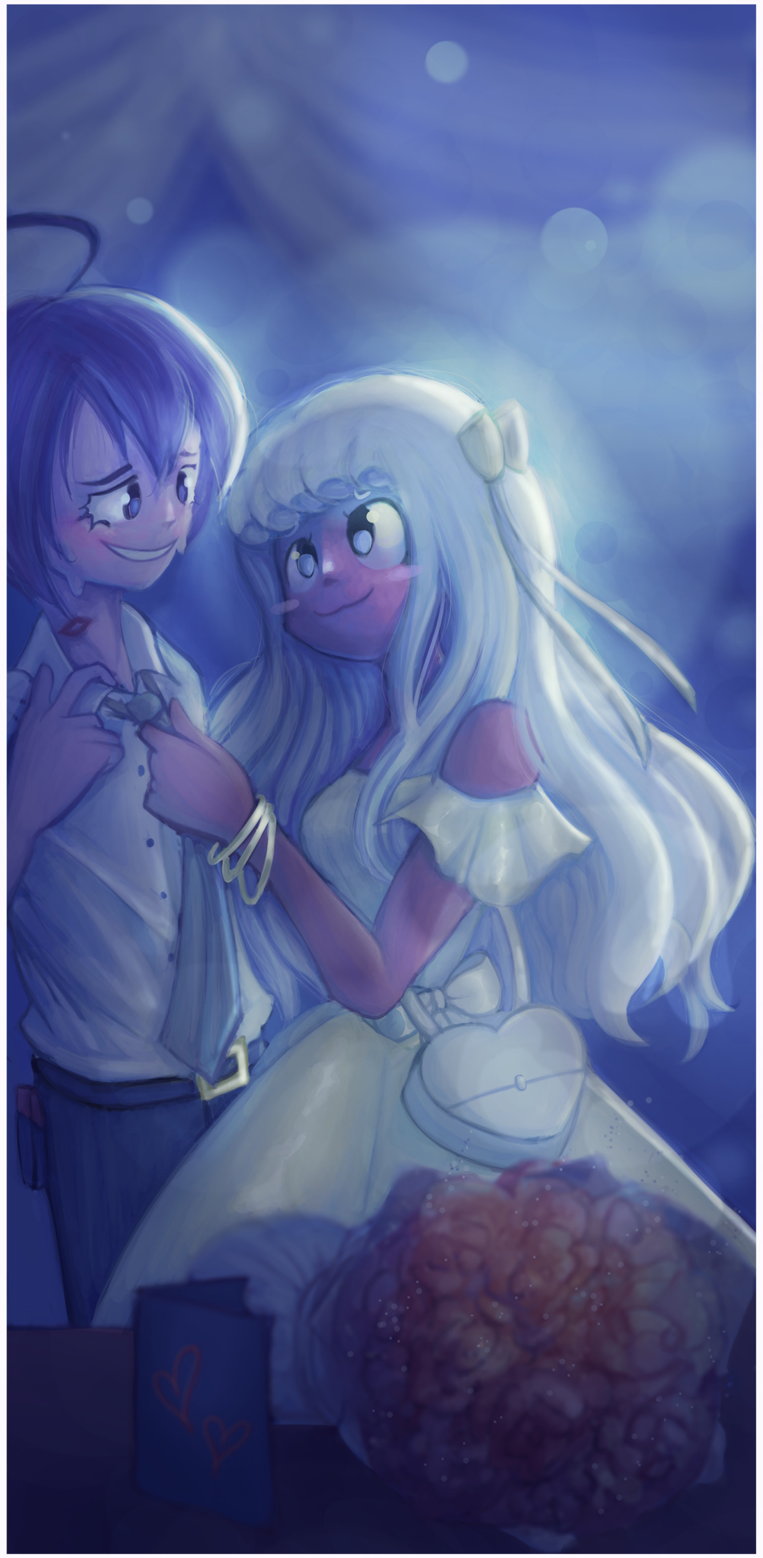
Artist: **Mocha** (@mochaart)



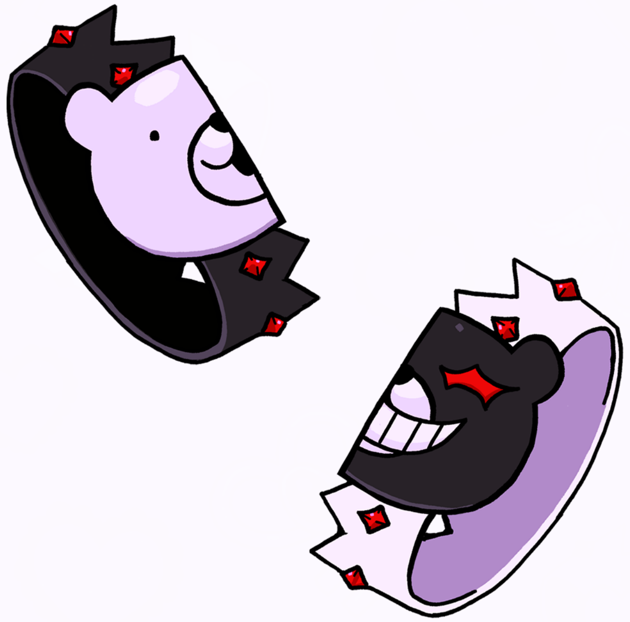
Icon Set

Artist: **Sarah** (@Axolotllotl)

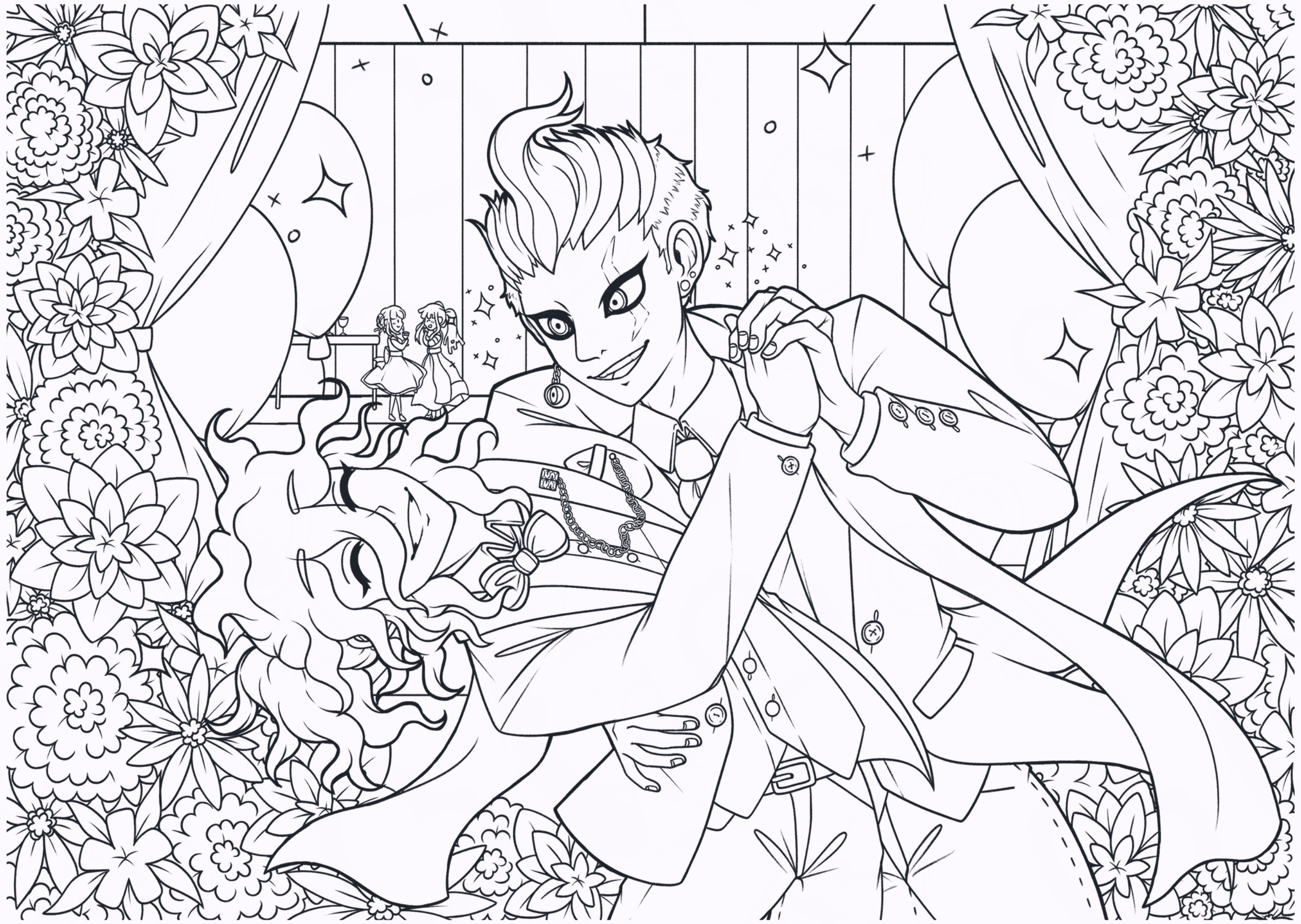

so Pretty
Maki
glorious!
angie
so cute!
aoi
how Lovely!~
Celeste
Chihiro
oh my!
HOT!
Miu
too sweet!
Peko
Sonia
adorable!!

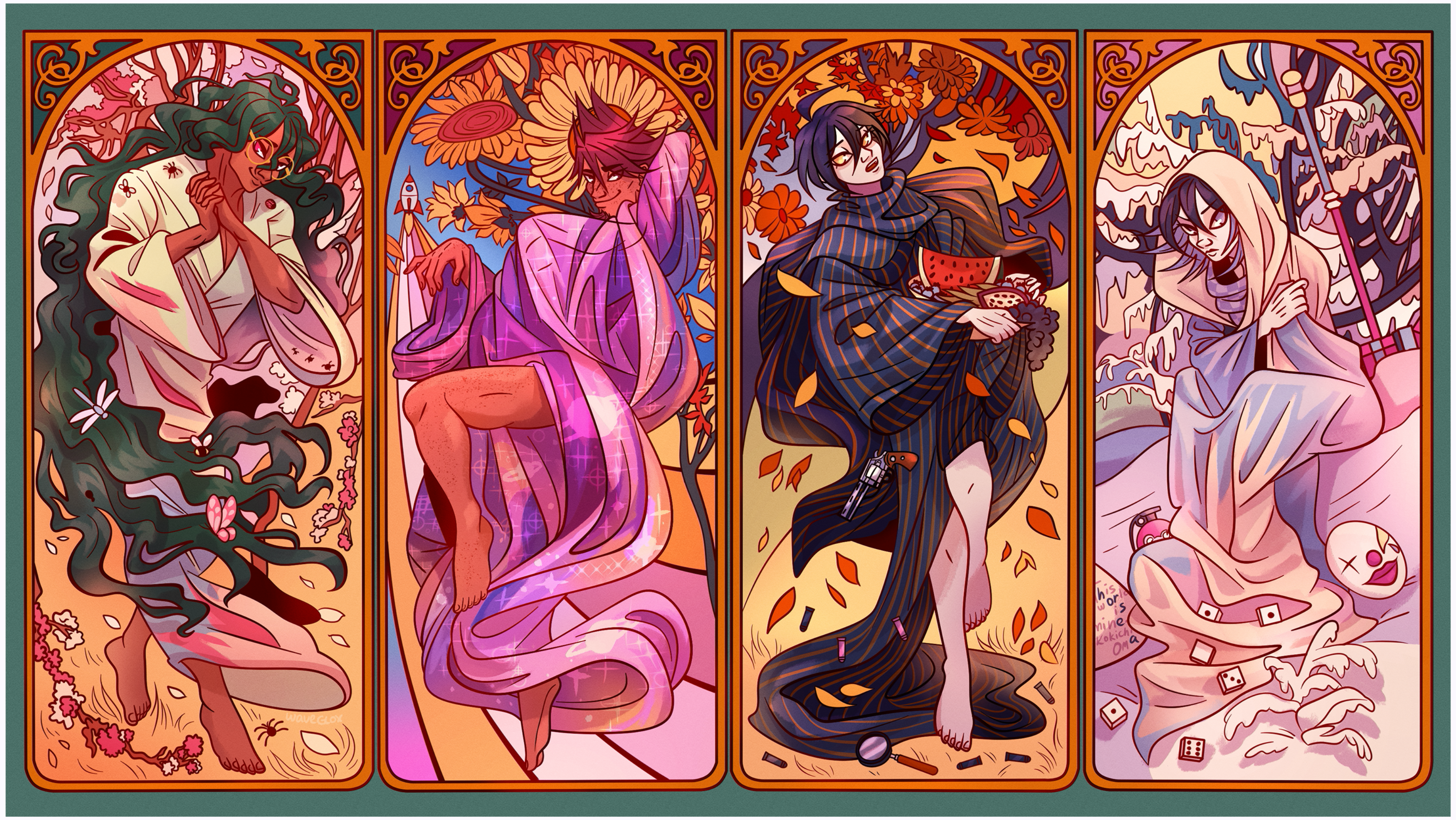


Phone Wallpaper
Artist: **Mint** (@Minttellect)



Desktop Background
Artist: **Wave** (@waveglox)



Printable
Coloring Page
Artist: **NNY**
(@nnytheprice)